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**STUDENT COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR  
IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION**

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**Submitted to the Open University in fulfilment of the requirements for**

**the degree of**

**Doctor of Education**

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## ABSTRACT

Universities in the English higher education sector are increasingly concerned about the impact of students' complaints. The introduction of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) in 2004 sees rising numbers of students referring their dissatisfaction externally and the subsequent publishing of OIA decisions against named universities from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 places students' complaints as high risk for reputational damage. With minimal empirical research evidencing the student complaint experience, higher education stakeholders perceive the introduction of tuition fees and an associated discourse of consumer entitlement to be the drivers of student dissatisfaction. Taking a pragmatic approach, this case study explores the influences on student complaint behaviour at Riverside University, a post-1992 'new' university with a widening participation mission. Grounded Theory techniques are utilised to analyse students' written complaints submitted to the university across a period of four academic years, 2006-2007 to 2009-2010. The focus on the students' perspective is supported by illustrative comments from complainants' online interviews.

Analysis demonstrates that the complaint journey is highly emotional and stressful as complainants interact with a culture that is not receptive to dissatisfied students. It also exposes the layered nature of complaints in a higher education environment: the 'trigger' issue initiating complaint behaviour sits over matters of previously suppressed discontent which subsequently shape the nature of the complaint. The research concludes that complaint behaviour is not linked to consumerist principles; students are not influenced by the level of fees paid. Complaints focus on assessment failure and degree classifications. Students' disappointment with an assessment result is the significant motivator of complaint



behaviour. Reaction to their academic standing represents the duality of students' understanding of higher education: achievement is expected as a transactional process and carries instrumental aspirations for their future, which some articulate in terms of employment. The focus on the value of their award as embodying hopes for their future is a unifying influence on student complaint behaviour across the diversity of the student complaint body.

## **PREFACE**

This case study is written in the present tense recognising that, as expressed and deeply felt by interview participants, a poor complaint experience can have a continuing lifetime impact. Past complaints can remain a current phenomenon for the student in higher education.

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Dr Laura Hills

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## **CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXT**

Are Universities ready for the surge of complaints predicted to come their way once the new generation of £9,000 fee-paying students begin to flex their consumer-rights muscles? (Grove, 2013, THES)

Inflamed by continuing dramatic headlines in its national media, the UK higher education (HE) sector ('the sector') is experiencing a response to students' complaints that verges on moral panic. In dissecting the attributes of moral panic Young (2009) notes that its key characteristic of disproportionality in response is misunderstood; moral panic is prompted by a reaction that is indeed proportionate but to the anxiety engendered, rather than the event itself. The sector's anxiety about students' public expressions of discontent replicates this and is so high that 'Students are being perceived as sites of danger' (Morley, 2003, p.133). This prevailing environment is the culmination of stakeholder initiatives that are refocusing the *raison d'être* of higher education and the nature of the relationship between university and student.

### **1.1 Legislative impact**

The last two decades in the English higher education system have been turbulent with a continuing raft of government legislation driving significant change within the learning environment and promoting the role of students in shaping the nature of their education. Legislative initiatives have fed a culture of expectation of student challenge and concern for the impact of any such challenge on institutional reputation.

The 1997 Dearing Report heralds acceptance of the concept that students should help towards the cost of their university education and the 1998 Teaching and Higher Education



Act sets a means tested annual fee of £1,000 for students entering higher education in 1998-1999. Later comes one of the most significant pieces of legislation in terms of impact on the operational life of universities, the Higher Education Act of 2004. Not only are students entering higher education in the academic year 2006-2007 introduced to income-related loans to fund increased annual tuition fees capped at £3,000 but the Act also requires the appointment of an independent body to run a higher education students' complaints' scheme in England and Wales. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) is introduced to review individual students' complaints; the OIA has no regulatory powers but its decisions prove to have an extensive impact on universities' policies and practice. The higher education media also plays a role in influencing the sector's response to complaint scenarios, drawing on OIA data to promote the introduction of higher tuition fees as being responsible for increasingly aggressive student expectations of their education. The BBC News Education Correspondent on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2010 quotes the Minister for Universities and Science as saying that 'England's university system needs a radical overhaul to give more value to students and taxpayers' (Harrison, 2010) and on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2010, the BBC News highlights a 12% rise in annual complaints to the OIA and compensation paid to students totalling £163,000. The report comments:

This heightened awareness of value for money in courses comes as a review considers whether there should be a further increase in tuition fees in England. For this reason Mr Behrens says "the number of complaints received is very likely to continue to grow in the next few years".

(Coughlan, 2010)

The OIA's Annual Report of 2010, encompassing the final year of this research, records a 33% increase in complaints on prior year. For the first time, two universities are named publically for failing to comply with the recommendations of an OIA formal decision; simultaneously the OIA records the intention to publish summary outcomes of decisions against universities. The OIA is explicit about compliance and there is a strong message that universities must conform or be publicly exposed. The number of student submissions to the OIA in 2010 of 1,341 complaints is negligible (0.07%) within the context of a UK higher education sector of 1.8M students (FTE)<sup>1</sup> but it is a reflection of universities' fear of reputational damage that decisions emerging from the OIA have an impact that is disproportionate to the volume of students' complaints.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) White Paper of June 2011, 'Students at the Heart of the System', represents a further shift in the educational landscape with the introduction of higher tuition fees of up to £9,000 annually for students entering university from 2012-2013. This removes higher education costs from public funding to the individual student, thus ensuring that the higher education sector will 'become more accountable to students, as well as to the taxpayer' (BIS, 2011, p.2). For the OIA this accountability is articulated through an inevitable increase in complaints by students about their university experience:

The new policy emphasis on students as consumers, and the doubling and trebling of tuition fees from 2012 creates big additional operational challenges to the OIA

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey 2011

in the context of existing significant annual rises in complaints received.

(OIA Annual Report, 2010, p.3)

The OIA's linking of rising tuition fees with a consequential rise in complaints is influential in directing the anxiety felt by higher education institutions.

## **1.2 Rationale for research topic**

Early research (Morley, 2003; Evans and Gill, 2001) observes that higher education treats complaints as a danger to reputation rather than as an indicator of student dissatisfaction that should be addressed for the benefit of the student experience. Across the course of this research administrative practitioners, who shape university policy, continue to speculate that rises in tuition fees correlates with increases in students' complaints (Cooper-Hind and Taylor, 2012; Jones, 2006 and 2011; Buckton, 2008).

The UK higher education sector is also taking a reactive rather than investigative approach to students' complaints; the causes of complaints remain perceived rather than evidenced and come second to a preoccupation with managing the associated conflict. Thus to date complaints handling in the sector reflects the introduction of models drawn from industry to address conflict, including mediation (Warters, 2005; Wagner, 1998) and the international education model of a campus ombudsman (Alcover, 2009; Astor, 2005). These approaches seek resolution not prevention. As this research concludes, the OIA is proposing (April 2014) national guidelines to support uniformity across universities' complaints policies. This results from consultation with the sector on process not complainant experience. Thus as a result of the failure of higher education itself to seek a researched solution to address the roots of an issue it perceives to be a serious threat, initiatives regarding prevention of

conflict remain with individual institutions. This research contributes to an evidence based approach to complaints prevention.

Administrative practitioners with responsibility for managing students' complaints in their institutions should be mindful of Bassey's (1995) view that 'Educational Research aims critically to inform educational judgements and decisions in order to improve educational action.' (Bassey, 1995, p.147).

Research should be harnessed to support an understanding of student behaviour and facilitate an evidence based solution to addressing student dissatisfaction and thus help dissipate institutional anxiety about students' complaints.

Prevention requires an understanding of the issues that initiate complaints and this research explores student complaint behaviour in order to make recommendations that will inform an effective approach to complaints handling in the institution in which the research is located, Riverside University. An imperative of the research is that it is student focused and the 'student voice' is dominant; the literature review demonstrates that this is an omission in national higher education research until very recently when a national quality driven agenda promotes the student as a learning partner and starts to elicit students' views.

### **1.3 Research scope**

The research addresses student complaint behaviour generally and focuses on the factors that influence students to submit complaints at institutional level in Riverside University, a post-1992 'new university' with a widening participation mission. The literature review, research questions and research design seek to analyse:

**Student complaint behaviour in a higher education institution**

and the key research question is phrased broadly:

**What influences students to submit formal complaints?**

This question plans a research study that explores the issues that prompt a student to initiate a complaint to senior staff at university level. Secondary research questions (Table 1 below) are drawn from the literature review and indicate the associated topic areas that aim to explore the key question and influence research design. The nature of the questions reflects the issues raised within the literature review and this is explored further in Chapter Two:

Research Area	Secondary Research Questions
<i>The complainants:</i>	Does the volume and profile of student complainants at Riverside University reflect the national picture?
	What is the profile of student complainants (gender/ethnicity/status)?
	How many times have complainants submitted formal complaints at university level?
<i>The complaint issues:</i>	What are Riverside University's students complaining about?
	What do complainants think the university can reasonably expect from them as students?
	Do students' complaints reflect any concern about employment?
	Do complaints reflect any issues relating to student feedback or involvement in course delivery?
	What outcomes are complainants seeking from their complaint submission?
	Do students' complaints reflect any concerns relating to contact time with academic staff?

Research Area	Secondary Research Questions
<i>The complaint experience:</i>	What does the student complainant feel about their experience of the university's complaint process?
	Do international students have any difficulties approaching the complaints process that might not be experienced by non-EEA students?
	Do students seek help with the complaints process and who supports them?
	Do students have any concerns about submitting a formal complaint?
	In what way do students' emotions impact complaint behaviour?
	Do students discuss their complaints with university staff during the complaint process?
<i>The customer/consumer experience:</i>	Do students consider themselves as customers of the university?
	Do students believe they have any rights as a student of the university?
	Is the 'student as customer' concept evident from students themselves?
	Are tuition fees perceived to be providing good value for money by student complainants?
	Is the student an experienced consumer such that they arrive at university accustomed to complaining in other areas of their life?
	What, if any expectations, do students have of the university?
	What do students think of the university's approach to 'customer care'?

**Table 1: Secondary research questions**

As the basis for the research, a complaint will follow a modified definition drawn from the literature review. A complaint is therefore understood to be a 'public behavioural response to dissatisfaction' (Cri , 2003) but qualified by the statement 'within the framework of the

institution's complaints policy and which requires a response by the institution'. This definition means that analysis will involve only complaints articulated in writing within the institution.

In common with the majority of universities, Riverside operates distinct policies for complaints concerning academic results ('appeals') and expressions of dissatisfaction about the delivery of university services ('complaints'). From the students' perspective this is an artificial divide and in this research the terminology 'complaint' encompasses both academic appeals concerning students' results and complaints about services delivered by the university.

Research will not consider the initial complaint stage with submissions made by students to their respective faculties. Inconsistency in the retention of student records at faculty level excludes this wider body of complaints. If dissatisfied with the initial stage of their complaint students can escalate concerns to senior staff at institutional level; if not resolved by the institution to the student's satisfaction the complainant is then free to refer the complaint to the OIA. Research is focused on those submitting institutional level complaints only; these have the potential for external exposure and represent the greatest risk from the university's perspective. It includes any complaints progressed to the OIA which form part of the sample under review. It seeks evidence explaining student complaint behaviour, knowledge of which aims to support Riverside University to address complaints more effectively and, within the wider conceptual framework, offer insight into the nature of the relationship between student and university. For the administrative practitioner this provides opportunity to introduce procedures that support an improved experience for students and

staff and respond positively to the risk to reputational damage from sources of dissatisfaction.

#### **1.4 The research institution**

The research is set in a UK higher education institution given the pseudonym of Riverside University, where the researcher has responsibility for the review of students' complaints at institutional level and manages the complaint cases encompassing the research period. The university's summary statistical return to the Higher Education Statistics Agency for 2009-2010, the last year of the student cohort researched, details the student profile:

- i. a student headcount population of 19,692 students, encompassing 11,041 full-time undergraduate students;
- ii. 29% of first year student entering from the local area;
- iii. a gender mix of 42% of undergraduate students female and 58% male;
- iv. one in five students from an ethnic background;
- v. 9.1% of full-time students are international students (non-EEA);
- vi. almost one in ten of students with a self-declared disability.

The sample of students used for research purposes is influenced by the requirement of Riverside's Research Ethics Committee (see Chapter Three, Research design).

#### **1.5 The wider context**

Clearly, contemporary relations between faculty, students, and universities cannot be structured with the same rudimentary tools that were used in elite systems of higher education when students were perceived as academic disciples with homogenous needs and wants. (Naidoo et al, 2011, p.1156)



Tuition fees and the associated concept of students as paying consumers are seen by the OIA as key drivers of complaints with students' expectations rising in line with fees. The national BBC News also witnesses this with Furedi quoted as saying:

The relationship with the student is no longer academic, it's a service provider and customer. The academic relationship is an endangered species.

(Coughlan, 2009)

This is indicative of a broader arena for research. The introduction of tuition fees brings in to scrutiny the nature of the formal relationship between university and student at a time when the understanding of what it means to be a student is characterised by complexity (Williams, 2013). In the 1970s the view that universities should act 'in loco parentis' to monitor the adolescent student which had been 'the heart of the model' (Silver and Silver, 1997, p.25) is gradually eroded with the change in the majority age to 18. The sector has subsequently and varyingly attempted to frame the relationship with students through the introduction of a formal contract. Buchter (1972) traces the history of the legal relationship between universities and their students and observes that the issue of an 'applied contract' (p.257) has prevailed; Nordin (1981) notes that '...the failure of the courts to articulate a coherent legal theory respecting legal rights of students has led to considerable confusion.' (Nordin, 1981, p.141). Some (Gaffney-Rhys and Jones, 2010) argue that the introduction of a formal contract, irrespective of associated arguments about legal standing, is an opportunity to manage student expectations on entry. Others (Rochford, 2008), consider that the notion of contracts reflects a need for universities to manage litigation risks arising from student expectations of economic outcomes, primarily employability. The introduction of a private tuition fee system for students coincides with a UK government requirement

that universities produce student charters (BIS White Paper, 2011, p.33) setting out the commitments of institutions and their students in a concise but clear way and this marks a further development in the relationship between university and student. It has been observed (Harris, 2007) that the high profile nature of students' complaints is driving 'a more legalistic or formal approach by institutions and an emphasis on giving 'value for money'' (Harris, 2007, p.599). Furedi (2011) sees market influences as being responsible for the emergence of the concept of the student as a customer and '...the attempt to recast the relationship between academics and students along the model of a service provider and customer' (p.2). Academics and students are thus working in a complex scenario in which rights, responsibilities and the nature of the learning relationship remain subject to debate.

The research into students' complaints is therefore set within a framework of an evolving relationship between students and university, perceived to be influenced by the commercial intrusion of rising fees payment. With a broad research question setting the boundary of the research, the literature review is important for shaping the supplementary research questions that inform the nature of the research tools and how they are implemented.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The nature of the literature review supporting the research develops over the course of the study and embraces a wide range of concepts. The breadth is important. The challenges of the insider researcher as a professional doctorate student are recognised (Drake and Heath, 2008; Sikes and Potts, 2008), in particular that most students have a lengthy experience of the matter being researched ‘...and on the basis of experience as a practitioner, they actually have a theoretical stance before beginning their project’ (Drake and Heath, 2008, p.129). A broad coverage of the literature supports management of the risk that presumptions from the researcher’s extensive personal experience of students’ complaints influence the direction of the study.

Yin (2012), advocates the purpose of the literature review as being ‘...to develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic’ (p.15). The research opens with a broad key research question and the literature review is an important vehicle for shaping the supplementary research questions that support internal validity and start to focus the data search. The purpose of the review is therefore to:

- i. isolate current research around students’ complaints in the UK higher education sector, thus identifying where research will contribute to an understanding of the complaint experience;
- ii. ensure coverage of wider social factors, both internal and external to Riverside University, that may influence student complaint behaviour but are not articulated within student documentation;
- iii. inform research design and subsequent data analysis by prompting underpinning research queries in support of the broad key research question.

The key literature areas are:

- iv. studies of students' complaints in the higher education environment in the UK initially and then overseas where tuition fees are embedded at tertiary level;
- v. the 'marketisation' of higher education and the student as a fee paying customer;
- vi. commercial consumer complaint behaviour;
- vii. power relations between university and student.

The following areas also become relevant as a result of theoretical sampling and developments in policy direction in the higher education sector across the period of the case study:

- viii. emotional complaints;
- ix. the student as partner in academic quality processes.

## **2.1 Students' complaints studies**

Research studies on students' complaints within the UK higher education sector are few. The OIA publishes an annual report reflecting on the extent and nature of students' complaints received by the Office in the prior year and these serve as a data reference point to set the Riverside experience within the context of student complaints at national level. It prompts the need to resolve an early research question:

*Do the volume and profile of student complainants at Riverside University reflect the national picture?*

The researching of UK students' complaints is taken from different perspectives. Harris (2007) reviews students' complaints through a legal lens, providing evidence from a management information focused study across 25 UK universities that reviews the varying complaints procedures and challenges for redress by students whilst capturing data on the profile of complainants and their complaints. Harris' (2007) conclusions note that universities are taking complaints more seriously as they start to define the relationship between academic and student; in doing so universities perceive an increasing emphasis on a contractual relationship and the need to think about 'value for money'. Harris (2007) touches on the reasons for complaints fleetingly but refers to data on the increased salaries for graduates to speculate that the value of a good degree in the workplace and the costs of attending university are increasing 'the likelihood of complaints being brought by dissatisfied students' (p.570). Van Hoorebeek et al (2011) at Bradford Business School align with Harris' (2007) work in reviewing universities internal complaint procedures and reflecting on how the rise in the number of students' complaints being handled by the OIA might best be addressed at institutional level. The focus is remedial, including dispute resolution mechanisms, except for a recommendation that 'litigation could probably be headed off if student expectations were properly managed' (p.210). Neither studies seek feedback from student complainants themselves.

Students' complaints are also addressed from a cultural perspective. The experience of the international student is considered by Pereda et al (2007) in a comprehensive piece of research using Q-sort methodology, a subsequent Likert-scale questionnaire and responses from over 330 students within the institution's international student body. The study is focused on issues of student satisfaction but by default indicates potential areas of complaint. University reputation, associated in the research institution with a particular subject area, is

most important to students; the level of fees charged is not. Hart and Coates (2010) build on this and in an empirical research study examine international students' complaint behaviour through in-depth interviews with East Asian students in a UK university. They report that historically, Asian students view themselves primarily as students. They are reluctant to complain due to the belief it will impact their grades; their 'trigger' point is reached when they believe teaching is compromised since this is core to their standing as students and complaints result from unrealistic expectations about contact hours in the UK higher education system and struggles with independent learning. Asian students are unwilling consumers and complain reluctantly. A natural cultural restraint to complain is overcome due to the importance of their education and is facilitated where complaining can be less confrontational, such as being handled by email. This confirms earlier work by Hart (2009) studying cultural adaptation and identifying a link between the East Asian student community's adaptation to Western values and their willingness to submit formal complaints. It adds to the small repertoire of research on university complaints in the UK.

Administrative practitioners proffer their own views, some framed on personal experience rather than an empirical approach. Jones (2006 and 2010) reflects that students paying increased costs for their education will be more demanding based in part on a review of the nature of complaints being handled by the OIA. Buckton (2008) explores the challenges of handling student appeals and states a personal opinion that a move to a perceived complaints culture is not the result of the impact of higher fees but rather students' growing awareness of their rights. Cooper-Hind and Taylor (2012) however offer conclusions resulting from student focused research in a UK university. Noting the lack of literature on student complaint behaviour in higher education, they report on the outcomes of interviews with 27 students who engage with their case study university's complaint procedures in 2009-2010.

Their results note the complexity and length of the complaint procedure, the stress involved in raising complaints, student concern about subsequent impact on their studies and the lack of support from academic staff. They also conclude that ‘...universities can expect the number of complaints to increase in line with the forthcoming rise in tuition fee’ (p.78) quoting a single piece of commercial complaint research (Gursoy et al, 2007), rather than the evidence emerging from their own study. They thus perpetuate the moral panic endemic in higher education that links the introduction of tuition fees with an increase in the number of student complainants.

With a small body of literature on national higher education complaints as a reference point, the review moves to the overseas experience where a fees regime is embedded and research may be relevant to the direction of student complaint behaviour. Jackson et al (2010) undertake a comprehensive study across 14 Australian universities exploring conflict between students and their institutions. The conclusions reflect the current UK scenario: very small numbers of complainants, although rising; an emphasis on assessment issues; wide variation in complaints procedures; student concern about pursuing complaints with staff being defensive; a lack of staff awareness about complaints handling; difficulty accessing staff to discuss complaints and staff concern about students’ expectations and their ability to sustain the independent learning needed to achieve a degree.

Recent research (Balkan and Goodboy, 2013; Goodboy and Frisby, 2014) with North American students furthers knowledge on the reasons why students within the US system withhold complaints and provides empirical insight in to complaint behaviour in the classroom. Goodboy and Frisby (2014) categorise complainants’ behaviour by identifying ‘expressive dissent’ (p.96) with students complaining to peers, ‘rhetorical dissent’ (p.97)

with complainants attempting to address matters with tutors and finally ‘vengeful dissent’ (p.97) where complainants submit aggressive complaints about staff as a means of expressing their dissatisfaction.

Wolf and Czekanski (2011) investigate the detailed areas of students’ complaints submissions on American undergraduate nursing programmes via a complex coding process but with conclusions quoting the non-empirical linking of fees and consumerism by Jones (2006) and Buckton (2008). Their data shows that the majority of complaints concern grading and course failure because of the subsequent impact of removal from the nursing programme. Gynnild (2011) also researches students’ complaints on grading issues, undertaking a comparative study between an American and Norwegian university and observing that there is a significantly reduced volume of complaints in the institution that works hard to explain marking methodology and addresses complaints informally with readily available staff. In earlier work Tantleff-Dunn et al (2002) canvas university students on their experience of conflict handling with their professors. They find that grading issues are the key issue but are disturbed by students’ comments that teaching staff are ‘...rude, insulting, unprepared, disorganised, ineffective, irresponsible and biased toward or against certain students’ (p.200). This translates in to an academic refusal to accept that there is an issue to be addressed and only increases student dissatisfaction. Interestingly there is evidenced student preference to be listened to respectfully by staff and given positive feedback rather than an inflationary grade rise. Fostering good interpersonal relationships forms an important part of the study’s recommendations.

In research based on the premise that universities are service industries, Ekiz et al (2008) study students’ perceptions about their complaints in universities in Northern Cyprus. In a



fledgling higher education environment, the country's intent is to provide 'student centred education' (p.247) and students' views of complaint handling is important for retention. This empirical research considers complaints from a justice perspective in terms of the fairness of institutional policies, how well students consider they are treated and the view of the appropriateness of the final outcome. Student feedback confirms that it is the nature of the solution and how it is arrived at that is considered important. Ekiz et al (2008) make practical recommendations regarding institutional staff training and communication that place an empathetic response to student concerns as a priority.

Other studies focused on students' complaints are in bespoke but relevant areas. Nkemeleke (2004) researches student complaint letters and job applications in the Cameroon. This is a language focused study but it is important for setting context and clarifying the approach of international students whose complaints submissions are '... verbose and flattering' (p.610). Nkemeleke's (2004) confirmation that this is a style evolved from cultural inheritance, rather than a complaint strategy, is important in analysing students' complaints in an English university. Drawing on research based in a commercial context into high maintenance employees Burke (2004) raises the phenomenon of the high maintenance student who may be a habitual complainant. Research also identifies the emergence of the 'helicopter parent syndrome' (White, 2005; Somers and Settle, 2010) and the characteristics of parents who interfere extensively in their adult children's studies.

This aspect of the literature review confirms the paucity of research relating to higher education students' complaints. The focus is complaint management and there is capacity for research that furthers an understanding of the reasons for student complaint behaviour

from the perspective of student complainants themselves. Research questions for exploration through the case study emerge from this aspect of the review:

*What is the profile of student complainants? (Gender/ethnicity/status)?*

*What are Riverside's students complaining about?*

*Do international students have any difficulties approaching the complaints process that might not be experienced by EEA students?*

*How many times have complainants submitted formal complaints at university level?*

*Do students seek help with the complaints process and who supports them?*

*What outcomes are complainants seeking from their complaint submission?*

## **2.2 The student as customer/consumer**

The national media promotes the introduction of higher tuition fees from 2005-2006 as being responsible for increasingly aggressive student expectations of higher education. In an online BBC News article Rob Behrens, Chief Executive of the OIA, is quoted as saying:

We believe that one reason for the increase is the rise in tuition fees. There is also more consumerist thinking amongst students. Students have become more assertive about their rights, and the services they are entitled to.

(Coughlan, 2009)

The 2011 BIS White Paper on the future of higher education, *Students at the heart of the system*, makes a single reference to the student as customer at the point of application to university but thereafter reflects on the student as a consumer, championed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England with a remit to '...promote the interests of students,

including as consumers...' (BIS White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*, June 2011). The literature base on the changing role of universities and students, resulting from the introduction of market principles into higher education, is of potential significance in influencing student expectations and behaviour.

It has been argued (Hussey and Smith, 2010) that the introduction of substantially higher tuition fees in the English higher education sector from 2012-2013 is symptomatic of the gradual introduction of market principles into education and reflective of an '...increasingly commercial and consumer-dominated culture' (p.45). It is also suggested (Kaye et al, 2006) that consumerism, rather than fees, is resulting in students increasingly challenging university delivery through complaints mechanisms. Consumerism in education emerges from the introduction of Total Quality Management principles and the associated emphasis on quality assessment by the consumer (Eagle and Brennan, 2007; Redding, 2005). Morley (2003) considers the assimilation of commercial quality approaches by higher education, namely the drive to please the customer, as merely another historical shift in the perception of the student. 'The customer care revolution' (Morley, 2003, p.129) has brought in expectations around the accountability of academic staff to students and a prominence given to students' opinions which potentially places the student in a powerful position.

The concept of students as consumers has also grown from the emergence of 'marketisation' in higher education where we see '...the application of economic theory of the market to the provision of higher education' (Brown, 2011, p.1). Williams (2013) defines 'marketisation' as '...the process by which institutions compete for customers - and a market in HE potentially occurs soon as there is more than one university bidding to attract students' (p.11). Irrespective of definition, the impact of market forces, supported by paying students,

is seen to change the understanding of a university education and the roles of the academics and students operating in that environment. Brown's (2011) scholarly review of recent literature on the 'marketisation' of higher education raises the issue of 'commodification' (p.44); here, education is seen as a product with value in the labour market and there is an associated tendency by students to adopt an instrumental approach to studies and focus on assessment outcomes. Students' employment skills are promoted to employers as part of a distinct government agenda; the economic direction of government policy is seen as a threat to academic dominance in higher education, raising expectations that 'Accordingly, students should base their decisions about their education on how it will contribute to their future employment and not, for example, on whether they would find it intrinsically interesting' (Brown and Carasso 2013, p.13). Universities shape students' aspirations which focus increasingly less on the obligations of the student as a learner and more on a transactional process where a degree is obtained in exchange for private fees. Brown quotes Williams (2011) in referring to the 'infantilisation' (Brown, 2011, p.43) of students where a university's emphasis on meeting customer demands results in students' belief in their right to challenge a university if it fails to meet student expectations and sees a shift in emphasis from the learning experience to a focus on the learning outcome. This is not a new perspective. Molesworth et al (2009) believe there is a government-led drive to ensure that higher education supports the workforce imperatives of industry. Drawing on experience in a vocational university similar to Riverside, they argue that students now perceive that obtaining a degree is their right as a passport to employment and 'we see the emergence of the dominant idea that suggests getting a 'good degree' is an entitlement paid for by their fees...their desire for a 2:1 is framed primarily by subsequent bargaining power in the job market' (p.279). Haywood et al's (2011) study with 60 students in another post-92

university confirms that students are influenced by the advertising glamour of university marketing materials promoting future careers and ‘future consumer pleasures’ (p.185).

The impact of consumerism is also reflected in the development of complaints policies in other public arenas. Allsop and Jones (2007) point to market forces and ‘the rhetoric of consumer empowerment’ (p.234) as the drivers of the development of highly publicised complaints policies in the National Health Service (NHS) from the mid-1990s and a subsequent increase in complaints received. In the NHS this has highlighted the demands of the complainant and the expectation of redress that will result in improved practice and customer retention. It is notable that the consumerist discourse in this sector has developed without any issues associated with fees and value for money. It is for consideration that students may already be sophisticated consumers on arrival at university and have particular expectations of a university course.

It has been observed that research literature uses the terms customer/consumer loosely and interchangeably (Maringe, 2011; Potts, 2005). Whilst early research points to consumerist principles in the NHS, the higher education student’s relationship with their university is being coined within educational research as ‘the student as customer (SAC)’ model (Potts, 2005; Lomas, 2007). The word ‘customer’ has now moved in to common operational usage within higher education. Svensson and Wood (2007) provide a critique of the student as customer, arguing that parallels with marketing concepts are not appropriate to the student/university relationship. University marketing techniques, including specifically the consistent canvassing of student opinion have, they state, shaped the students’ perception of themselves as customers. The article argues that the university/ student relationship needs redefining with clarity about the expectations of students as learners. Conclusions are based

on a literature review primarily of articles in the late 1990s just after self-financed tuition fees were introduced; it is written in a casual style that reflects an emotional response by the authors. Phrases which refer to a 'myopic commitment' (p.26) to customer principles cast some doubt on objectivity but the argument is in line with literature addressing the impact of consumer principles on the student/university relationship.

Research summaries here are supported by the work of Lomas (2007) whose conclusions are based on sound empirical data from research interviews across six universities using grounded theory techniques and concluding that:

The results from the study suggest that, although staff were generally uncomfortable with the term customer, they acknowledged the growing influence of the student and that this influence will be greater with the introduction, in the UK, of 'top up' fees from September 2006.

(Lomas, 2007, p.42)

Lomas' literature review highlights a divide between messages from the UK government and university management about the 'student as customer' and the rejection by many academic staff of the notion of the student customer model.

Maringe and Gibbs (2009) reflect on the implications for the relationship between student and university. Whilst the dominance of market principles in higher education has resulted in the concept of the student customer, the notion of supplier and customer is not, in their view, appropriate. Universities owe a duty of care to the vulnerable student when determining the offering they make. Students themselves wear different hats during their time at university - customer, client or 'campus citizen' (p.138) - so the concept of customer

is not comprehensive enough to accommodate a full understanding of what students need. Maringe and Gibbs (2009) proffer that the student, customer or not, seeks the following key benefit from their university:

...the promise of employment, the life-enhancing nature of the educational product and increasingly international education context, and the promise of higher than normal lifetime earnings.....

(Maringe and Gibbs, 2009, p.139)

Drawing on a review of Total Quality Management literature which places the customer at the heart of quality, Maringe (2011) argues that, whilst the concept of students as customers has received extensive review, students do not purchase higher education in the same way that customers purchase goods. They do not have the same rights as customers since there is no refund if a student fails a course. He observes that an (unquantified) increase in students' complaints about teaching and services can be attributed to the quality driven customer culture in higher education. He concludes, however, that the opinion that students feel they should expect more, and have more to say about services, because they pay fees is only speculative.

Based on research across media literature, Williams (2011; 2013) views the press as responsible for promoting the student as customer. Citing articles that construct students as expecting a qualification without playing any significant part in the process, she argues that the government's focus on employment is responsible for devaluing the knowledge aspect of the university qualification. Government policy emphasises the transactional nature of the student/university relationship where paying fees results in a qualification that is a

passport to the workplace. Universities themselves are complicit in this by promoting ‘...a university degree as a ticket for future employability....’ (Williams, 2013, p.83). A consequence is that in the relationship between service provider (university) and customers (students) who expect a degree as an entitlement, the door is now open to complaints about service quality.

Finney and Finney (2010) explore the ramifications of the student as customer model in an empirical study which researches how students’ perceptions of themselves as customers is reflected in their subsequent relationship with the institution. As this is drawn from the experience of an American university, it is approached with some caution but it is an influential piece being one of the few studies drawing conclusions from direct surveys with students. In particular the research aims to determine how much the ‘student as customer’ concept raises issues of personal entitlement resulting in formal complaints when not realised:

...the results indicate that SAC perceptions are prevalent; more importantly a student who holds SAC perceptions is also likely to hold attitudes and to engage in behaviours that are not conducive to success as a student. Students who perceive themselves as customers of the university are more likely to complain and to feel entitled to receive positive outcomes from the university; they are not, however, any more likely to be involved in their education.

(Finney and Finney, 2010, p.286).

The conclusions build on Svensson and Wood’s (2007) research in confirming that students can take a transactional approach to their education and perceive that they are owed



something by the university. Issues of student entitlement dominate the research results. Drawing on exchange theory, it is suggested that students might expect outcomes irrespective of academic capability; the conclusion, however, notes that students with expectations are in fact involved in their education and may make extra effort even though it may not result in improved grades. Finney and Finney's (2010) research involves a set of hypotheses and a seven point scale Likert modelled questionnaire to over 1000 students. There is no supplementary exploration of student behaviour through an interview process and the authors recognise that further research needs to be done on the wider factors which could influence engagement with learning.

There is extensive research literature on the ramifications of the acceptance of the student as a customer of higher education; the relevance for complaints is the nature of students' perception of the consumer/customer concept and whether any understanding of being a customer influences complaint behaviour at Riverside. Unfulfilled expectations are a feature of international students' complaints (Hart and Coates, 2010) but could be endemic to the student population as a whole, potentially as a result of university marketing campaigns, the introduction of tuition fees and the embedding of the customer concept.

Discussions on the impact of tuition fees raise the concept of value for money and how this might direct student behaviour. In a comprehensive UK study with higher education students Woodall et al (2012) conclude there is a distinct difference between perceptions of value by home students and those of international students. 'For home students Price remained key, but for international students Results was most important...' (p.14) in a situation where the scale of the financial sacrifice by overseas students is the influential factor.

Allen (2012), an experienced administrative practitioner, discusses the impact of tuition fees rises in view of the political indications of a removal of the current fee 'cap' at £9,000. He observes that recruitment is marginally shaken with the first wave of fees rises in 2006 but that the generous loan arrangements mean that heavy debt is not a realistic picture for most students. It is only recently with Bates and Kaye's (2013) focus group research in two post-1992 UK universities with students representing the pre and post 2012 higher fees regime that there has been a student centred assessment of students' expectations in light of the latest fees rise. Bates and Kaye's (2013) discussions with both groups disclose that student expectations remain the same in a number of areas and that both samples of students are largely happy with provision. All students confirm they are studying with a view to employment, although notably those coming in to the later higher fees regime appeared slightly more subject focused. Whilst the caveat on the research is that it takes place in only one subject area (psychology), Bates and Kaye (2013) conclude there is an emphasis on graduate employment in higher education that universities need to take account of in their provision to students within the new fees regime. However, their interviews furnish no evidence that there are aspects of a consumerist discourse influencing complaint behaviour. Student dissatisfaction is not attached to the notion that fees guarantee a particular outcome. There is no support for Molesworth's (2009), or Svensson and Wood's (2007), assertion that students believe a good degree is their right as the result of fees paid.

In an Australian empirical study White (2007) observes a sense of alienation resulting from the expansion of higher education and associated mass lectures in which students feel they lose personal identity and are unable to establish a relationship with inaccessible teaching staff. It is noteworthy that this study reports that students consider that the effort they make should be rewarded in addition to the quality of the work assessed. There is a mismatch

between student and academic understanding about the quality of the work needed to secure good grades, such that students' sense of unfairness results in 'expressions of dissatisfaction' (p.601). White (2007) concludes that: '....being a fee-paying consumer of university services was not at the forefront of all students' preoccupations. The relatively low salience of fees for many students arises in part from the fact that the fee debt can be repaid well after students have completed their studies.' (White, 2007, p.603).

The apparent empowerment of the student as a customer via tuition fees payment is purported to change the nature of the relationship between university and student and the perception of the role of higher education. To identify if this is relevant to student complaint behaviour at Riverside this case study seeks to address:

*Do students consider themselves as customers of the university?*

*What, if any expectations, do students have of the university?*

*Do students believe they have any rights as a student of the university?*

*Is the 'student as customer concept' evident from students themselves?*

*Are tuition fees perceived to be providing good value for money by student complainants?*

*Is the student an experienced consumer such that they arrive at university accustomed to complaining in other areas of their life?*

*What do students think of the university's approach to 'customer care'?*

## **2.3 Consumer complaint behaviour**

With consumer concepts to the fore, literature in the consumer complaint arena carries relevance if students consider themselves to be customers. Marketing and service industry based research on customer relations is extensive and the literature search is disciplined in selecting commercial studies that might have relevance to the student complaint context.

Cri  (2003) reviews a range of literature dealing with consumer complaint behaviour to support his view that complaints represent the outcome of a process. He reflects that prior research (Dolinsky, 1994), concentrates on the immediate cause and effects that result in a complaint but Cri  demonstrates that complaints are a process of evaluation by the consumer and are time sensitive. He makes an important distinction that the complaint outcome might be different from that originally intended by the complainant. Whilst the decision to complain occurs at the point of dissatisfaction with a product, the complainant's response may be 'modulated' (p.68) by subsequent reflection and any early positive indicators from the supplier or any further negative issues emerging from the product. So the early reaction by the supplier is significant in determining the direction of the complaint. Identifying the issues that move the consumer from dissatisfaction to articulated complaint, which may or may not represent the original issue, is important for prevention and effective complaint management.

In terms of motivation, research methods isolate the 'trigger' issues that prompt students' complaints but it is for investigation as to whether complaint behaviour is then influenced by the nature of the subsequent complaint journey as much as the 'trigger' issue itself. The literature on consumer complaint behaviour is influential in highlighting the significance of the complaint handling process in potentially shaping the behavioural response of Riverside's student complainants. Although Finney and Finney (2010) argue that students' view of themselves as customers is detrimental to the complaint process, Webb and Jagun (1997), in an empirical study in a UK university prior to the fees regime, confirm the relevance of taking on customer focused practices by responding positively to students' complaints. Empowering employees to address complaints at an early stage is the means to manage proactively students' dissatisfaction and minimise external complaint behaviour.

Commercial services marketing research literature has long been focused to understanding the complaint environment, and the issues that facilitate complaint resolution. The commercial environment draws conclusions about the customer complaint experience that could be transferable to the higher education sector. Of significance is the 'double deviation' (Loo et al, 2013; Casado-Diaz and Nicolau-Gonzalez, 2009) and 'triple deviation' (Edvardsson et al, 2011) complaint impact where, having experienced product failure, a customer has a continuing poor experience if the subsequent complaint process is also stressful. 'Double deviation' is summarised as 'a perceived inappropriate and/or inadequate response to failures in the service delivery system' (Casado-Diaz and Nicolau-Gonzalez, 2009, p.1659). This then makes the customer recovery process more challenging and with the potential for the customer to experience 'triple deviation' 'when the second, complex service recover process fails to include communication skills that express empathy, listening and the co-design of the solution... The customer might not understand or accept the recovery process' (Edvardsson et al, 2011, p.337). Research confirms that, following an unsatisfactory experience, complaints must be well handled. Where initial complaints have been mishandled ('double deviation') it is critical that the processing of the complaint takes precedence over the nature of the complaint itself in order to avoid 'triple deviation'. At the point of 'triple deviation' the recovery of customer loyalty is extremely difficult.

Cooper-Hind and Taylor (2012) draw on commercial practice in the closing stages of their study when stating that complaints may be influenced by tuition fee increases. They quote Gursoy et al's (2007) study examining those factors influencing restaurant customers' propensity to complain. The latter confirms that price conscious consumers will have a leaning to complaint behaviour and that this is exacerbated in a service industry where value for money is less evident; confusion around evaluation can lead to increased complaint

behaviour. Gursoy et al's observation of potential relevance here is that individuals with 'internal control', those who feel in control of their lives, are more likely to complain to put themselves back in control after a poor experience. Individuals who feel controlled by external influences have less tendency to complain. They also conclude that 'consumers are likely to complain only if the perceived benefit from the complaining is worth the effort' (p.377). Gursoy et al's (2007) conclusions are therefore less about price than confirmation of the importance of complaint handling and an emphasis on strategies that assure the customer that complaining will result in positive outcomes.

We also learn from the commercial world (Nimako and Mensah, 2012) that complaint behaviour is not motivated by aspirations for compensation; complainants only submit a complaint where they feel there will be some hope of redress in the situation itself. Commercial companies emphasise the immediate aftermath of the complaint and creating an environment in which customer recovery is possible.

Potentially significant is a cross-cultural stream in commercial complaint research, already identified in higher education by Hart and Coates (2010). Sharma et al (2010) observe some cross-nationality issues in a study of dissatisfaction responses in a modelled scenario across students from America, Singapore and Korea. American students consider complaining as a positive assertive action whilst their peers feel more comfortable in a non-verbal complaint scenario. This is subsequently mirrored in Chen et al's (2011) study with American and Taiwanese University students which is focused on demonstrating the cultural gap between the nationalities. They observe the cultural difference between the individualistic western approach with emphasis on the rights of the person and the collectivist Asian view which stresses personal interest being subordinate to that of the group.

Service recovery is an area that Gruber et al (2011) believe higher education has to date failed to address and where the introduction of commercial market principles is relevant. In order to address complaints effectively universities must encourage students to voice their dissatisfaction. The Cooper-Hind and Taylor (2012) study evidences that students do not find complaint policies accessible in terms of understanding and that they find the complaint resolution process too slow. Gruber et al's (2011) research examines higher education students' expectations from a cultural perspective undertaking in-depth 'laddering' interviews with UK and Indian students. The conclusions are informative for student complaint handling. Staff being responsive to complaints through listening and taking an empathetic stance is high profile with all students and important for moving forward with resolution; the relationship with academic tutors is also important and the research confirms that this is perceived by students to support good academic performance and enhanced career prospects.

*What does the student complainant feel about their experience of the university's complaint process?*

*What outcomes are student complainants seeking from their complaints?*

## **2.4 Power relations**

Gruber et al's (2011) assertion that students should be encouraged to express dissatisfaction touches on the power relationship between student and university which is a potential influence on student complaint behaviour.

Naidoo et al (2011), reflecting on the impact of the growth of the understanding of the student as a consumer, observe that consumer complaint behaviour is greatly influenced by context. Within higher education, student development as a consumer influencing delivery

via feedback mechanisms is constrained by the university's 'power to award or withhold a degree based on their judgement of the students' performance' (p.1150).

Su and Bao (2001) address complaints from the perspective of the power relationship between the student, university and the student's perception of their position within that relationship. An empirical study involving 187 students in a North American university identifies three types of complainant:

- i. 'Passive recipients': dissatisfied students who take 'avoidance' action by disengaging with the problem, for example, by avoiding a particular class;
- ii. 'Private complainers': the majority of student complainants who may complain to peer colleagues but take no action;
- iii. 'Voicers': the smallest group of complainants who wish to take formal action to resolve the problem.

Student complainant types are driven by an analysis of a student's perception of academic standing based on five categories ranging from 'punishment power' to 'referent power'. 'Punishment power', understood as academic ability to withdraw or award academic standing, is the most significant variable and dictates complaint style. Students who view the institution as having the ability to undertake some form of retaliation through the assessment process are not inclined to complain and they become 'passive recipients'. Su and Bao's (2001) study indicates that the largest group are those that take no formal action but complain to peer colleagues. These are the students who may be sensitive to the positional power of university staff and feel unable to articulate their complaint. The 'Voicers', those who submit formal complaints, are the smallest group of dissatisfied students. Su and Bao's (2001) research is limited with the sample being weighted to mature



MBA students and a predominantly quantitative analysis that could have been enhanced by some qualitative context.

Mukherjee et al (2007) recognise that the concept of the customer may impact the power relationship between student and university. Sophisticated empirical data, including reliability testing of responses from a 'convenience sample' (p.1619) of undergraduate students in a UK business school, validates Su and Bao's (2001) conclusions that the majority of students complain to peer colleagues. Students react positively to power perceptions of staff based on their subject expertise and do not respond to staff who they perceive as using reward power through marking standards, which students view as a form of punishment. The recommendation is that universities promote 'voice' behaviour, where the student is encouraged to articulate their complaint formally so that it can be acted upon and that academic staff are encouraged to take a supportive stance to students to encourage an open dialogue about matters of dissatisfaction. The caveat on Mukherjee et al's (2007) case study is that students are asked to consider a false scenario provided by the researchers and responses do not represent individuals' real experience. Reward authority, however, remains a live issue with the later Cooper-Hind and Taylor (2012) study:

Students' biggest concerns about making a formal complaint were the potential impact on their academic grades, and how their tutor would respond to them in future.

(Cooper-Hind and Taylor, 2012, p.74)

An early study by Benesch (1999) examines power relations in the classroom and takes an alternative view. In an urban American college in the context of rising fees the research considers how students exercise their rights as '...active participants rather than compliant

subjects' (p.315). Benesch states an adherence to Foucault's concept of power as ever present, co-existing with resistance and indeed endemic to society ('...a society without power relations can only be an abstraction'... Foucault, 1994, p.343). The students in Benesch's research sample attempt to influence academic delivery through questioning and informal complaints and eventually mitigate professorial control. Students are able to put themselves in a position of negotiation and participation in decisions that impact them; as Youdell (2011) notes '...students are involved in practices of insurrection as they are subjectivated' (p.32). Mills' (2003) reflections on Foucault stress his unconventional view of power as a pervasive entity that is consistently negotiated between individuals, rather than the traditional model expressing the domination of institution or individual over another. This is echoed by Mann (2001) who argues that experiences in HE are context bounded, that power resides within context and that both academics and student hold varying power levels within their educational relationship; any exploration of the student experience must encompass this. Within the context of higher education there is a historic perception of a power tension between the university and student (Mann, 2008) and research outcomes need to establish if this impacts student complaint behaviour. There is a need to supplement the main research question with an exploration that seeks to understand if power relations, however interpreted, impact student complaint behaviour:

*Do students have any concerns about submitting a formal complaint?*

*Do students discuss their complaints with university staff during the complaint process?*

## 2.5 Emotional complaints

Documentary analysis and the interview stage of this case study evidence an emotional response from student complainants that prompts a later review of prior research in the services marketing field focused on the emotional aspect of complaint behaviour to support reflection on student responses.

Based on a commercial field study Chebat and Slusarczyk (2005) stress the importance of addressing the emotional side of complaints: 'Service companies should realise that consumers' actual behaviour is mostly emotion-driven.' (p. 670) and that emotions drive behavioural reactions, noting also a potential link between educational background and tendency to complaint behaviour. Gustaffson (2009) and Tronvoll (2011) point to the negative emotions which shape how a customer views future events; frustration in particular is perceived to drive aggressive behaviour that is expressed in a complaint:

There is a significant relationship between negative emotions and complaint behaviour, with frustration being the latent negative emotion that is the best predictor of such behaviour.

(Tronvoll, 2011, p.124)

Other consumer focused researchers (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998; Mattson et al, 2004; Baker et al, 2013) also focus on the role of emotions in the complaint process. Individual response by a dissatisfied consumer is driven by a 'cognitive appraisal process' (Stephens and Gwinner, p.175) that considers if the complaint issue is significant and the emotion attached stressful enough to pursue. When the issue is personally important, touches on personal values and could prevent the achievement of set goals, then feelings of threat and stress are generated; this gives rise to strong emotions and the use of coping action to resolve

the stress issue, resulting in complaints. Conversely Lau and Ng (2001)'s study in to 'negative word of mouth' (p.164) concludes that the value of a product to the individual determines complaint reaction; where the product value is low, there may be no formal complaint but there will be negative word of mouth statements to peers. Equally, as Schoefer and Diamantopolous' (2008) consumer survey proves, managing negative emotions is critical for good service recovery. Irrespective of the outcome of dissatisfaction, personal emotions are seen to influence the decision.

Baker et al (2013) explore the impact of emotion and national cultural ideology on the intention to complain within a commercial environment. They observe a customer preference to express dissatisfaction in a non-confrontational, non-verbal manner. Complaints will only occur when that expression is missed; as Crié (2003) notes, it is then the process around the complaint that becomes the issue. Baker et al (2013) also confirm that:

Importantly, different individuals or groups may be uniquely predisposed in their response to felt emotions elicited by a particular event.

(Baker et al, 2013, p.816)

This confirms the identified cultural perspective attached to complaints (Crié, 2003; Zourrig et al, 2009) with the emotional independence of western complainants noted. The belief here is that the cultural norms of any particular group influence the response to a service failure. This case study therefore has sensitivity to indications of complaint behaviour that might characterise Riverside students as a distinctive social grouping. It is also worth noting that prior research (Lee-Wingate and Corfman, 2011) also argues that the disclosure of emotions about a poor service experience is supportive to ameliorating consumer views of

unfairness but with the proviso that disclosure is not to the service provider. Third party handling of complaints provides a mechanism for lessening dissatisfaction and supporting service recovery.

Thus research in this area consistently confirms the feature of an emotional response in complaint behaviour and the need to continue to manage emotions as part of complaint handling strategy (Varela-Neira and Iglesias, 2010; Soscia, 2007). Mattson et al's (2004) empirical review of commercial complaint letters confirms that:

...there appears to be consensus amongst researchers that although emotions often interact with other mental processes, they influence actions considerably.

(Mattson et al, 2004, p.943)

The literature review moves to emotional complaints as a result of the emergence of strong emotion being expressed by student complainants. It confirms that an emotional response has been identified as an influence on complaint behaviour in prior research in the commercial environment and therefore identifies a need to consider if the emotional response by Riverside University's students impacts complaint behaviour in the same way:

*In what way do student' emotions impact complaint behaviour?*

## **2.6 Students as learning partners**

The UK higher education's review body, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) promotes student involvement as partners in university quality processes, as reflected in their 2012 audit theme *Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement*. There is a QAA expectation that students should be fully engaged in course

operations from development and approval through to feedback opinions on course delivery at all levels. The QAA itself accepts that the reality of the student as a partner in learning is still developing and this emerging concept is the subject of recent research.

Carey (2013) reflects on student engagement with course development; he observes students' willingness to be involved, despite their concern about the possible ramifications of making any critical comment. He does, however, note that student participation is at an embryonic stage nationally and that there would need to be a shift away from the formality of the university committee structure for students to feel comfortable and fully engaged. The same conclusion is drawn from the QAA's review of the first year experience which 'suggests that achieving the goal of students as 'partners' in educational enhancement and quality assurance has some way to go' (p.9). Luescher-Mamashela (2013) charts the development of student representation as an integral part of university governance and observes it as a solution to managing student expression that might otherwise be politically disruptive, as witnessed in the public objections to the introduction of tuition fees.

Among the benefit to the university may be a more open, peaceful and responsive academic environment, insofar as student involvement in university decision making is expected to moderate student demands (and those of other participants) generate trust and improve the quality of decisions.

(Luescher-Mamashela, 2013, p.1451)

There is subsequent reflection that students may be better suited to acting within areas where they are key stakeholders such as student support and welfare. The reality of the student as a fully engaged party in higher education is a significant change in discourse in the

university/student relationship and potentially influences student complaint behaviour. The research is therefore alert to this and seeks to establish what complainants believe the university can expect of them:

*What do complainants think the university can reasonably expect from them as students?*

The direct consultation with students as part of the quality agenda has also resulted in recent empirical research into student satisfaction issues that is helpful in raising matters that may influence students' complaint behaviour.

Sponsored by the QAA, Kandiko and Mawer (2013) report on a large scale research project to elicit the views of higher education students in the United Kingdom in 2012-2013, focused on student expectations of quality and standards in the first year of the higher tuition fees regime. Interviews and focus groups are held with over 150 students at 16 institutions using grounded theory techniques to analyse the outcomes. The aim is to secure students' general thoughts on their student experience and bring the student voice in to institutional decision making. One of the dominant outcomes is that students are interested in value for money, which they articulate in terms of contact time (teaching hours) and the resources available to them but at the same time there is confirmation that fees are not an issue: '...there were no examples of cost being deployed as a reason for choice of institution and the concept of a fees 'market' was almost entirely absent' (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013, p.22). One of the particular messages is the priority placed on employment by all students:

Across all subjects of study, the primary purpose for students entering higher education was to improve their career prospects and as a pathway for career

enhancement....students spoke of needing to go beyond their degree to gain the skills and experience they would need for employment, highlighting the importance of extra-curricular activities, internships and work placements opportunities.

(Kandiko and Mawer, 2013, p.10)

Graduate employment is reported as the main aim of entering university for most students and is the conclusive view of the purpose of higher education emerging from the study: 'the content of degree programmes was evaluated through an employability lens.' (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013, p.38). There is strong student demand for personalised tuition that reflects their individual needs and a common concern amongst students about independent learning:

Guidance on how to learn independently was thus much sought after, with absence of such guidance hindering students as they attempted to learn independently in the manner they felt was expected of them.

(Kandiko and Mawer, 2013, p.51)

This is in the context of the transitional change from a school environment with high contact time. The required change is felt profoundly by some students. In a reflection of Mann's (2001) concept of the student being a lonely migrant entering the alien culture of higher education, the report notes that in the transition to higher education, students feel lost and unsure of what is expected of them. Students are not well prepared for the transition to higher education and expectations need to be managed, with more support available and a particular focus on helping students enhance their employability skills.



In another QAA sponsored piece of research, Douglas et al (2014) survey 350 undergraduate students about their satisfaction with areas of teaching and learning and general support services. The areas important to students relate to the ease of contacting university staff, their willingness to help and effective communication.

Tomlinson (2014), on behalf of the Higher Education Academy, undertakes an extensive piece of research interviewing students across seven universities to ensure he captures the marginalised 'student voice'. The aim is to understand the impact of fees on students, how costs may have shaped students approach to higher education alongside their expectations and their experience of higher education. Tomlinson notes varying degrees of instrumentalism and that 'Those adopting the most instrumental approaches are likely to emphasise the 'end product' of their learning and do all they can to fulfil these needs' (p.6). Confirming his earlier (2013) research, Tomlinson observes that employability is the real aim of the university experience and the success of that is linked to the final degree outcome. Whilst at university students remain very keen for ready access to academic staff. Tomlinson finally argues for a redefining of the role of the student as a partner in learning and not as a consumer/customer since fees are not deemed a deterrent to entering university:

Increased fees do not appear to be a major deterrent in applying for higher education among students.....the anticipated longer-term financial and personal gains from higher education dampen the concerns about accumulated debt.

(Tomlinson, 2014, p.42)

This final section of the literature review is important in hearing the student viewpoint. It raises a number of issues identified as important to students in the later higher fees regime

that may be discernible as emerging influences on student conflict issues during the earlier period of the case study focus. Thus consideration needs to be given to:

*Do students' complaints reflect any concern about employment?*

*Do complaints reflect any issues relating to student feedback or involvement in course delivery?*

*Do students' complaints reflect any concerns relating to contact time with academic staff?*

## **2.7 Chapter conclusion**

As Hart observes, there is a 'dearth of previous studies' (Hart, 2010, p.309) researching the experience of student complainants in the UK higher education system. At the start of this case study (2011) few studies represent empirical research and the views of students themselves; those that do focus on the international student experience (Pereda et al, 2007; Gruber et al 2011; Hart and Coates, 2010). The student 'voice' is heard later in the Cooper-Hind and Taylor (2012) study of students engaging with their university's complaint procedures and in the more recent raft of sector based research which explores students' views on matters of satisfaction (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013; Tomlinson, 2014). There is therefore research value in contributing to the very small base of purely UK complaint studies that profile the student voice across the entire student body, particularly from the perspective of individual students who have experienced the full complaint journey in a UK university. No prior study is identified that engages with students' written complaint submissions and there is novelty in considering the nature of the narrative expressions furnished by student complainants to their university. Why are students complaining, what drives them to initiate a complaint and what do they think of their subsequent experience?

With only a small literature base on the UK student complaint experience the review also encompasses studies on international HE complaints and domestic areas that might impact or influence student complaint behaviour. This reveals a number of contentious matters of debate. 'Marketisation' (Brown, 2011) and the infiltration of consumer principles in to higher education is seen to influence students' customer entitlement tendencies (Finney and Finney, 2010) and an expectation of an award as the outcome of fees payment. The subsequent concept of the student as a customer warrants reference to commercial complaint behaviour and the consequences of mishandling the complaints process (Edvardsson et al, 2011; Loo et al, 2013) which could influence student complainants' responses.

Cross-cultural issues are identified as commercially significant with companies seeking early complaint resolution and, as a feature of prior HE research, cultural influences remain under review. The literature review also reflects an expansion as the research progresses. Following the analysis of students' complaint texts, research in to the emotional nature of complaints and any influence on complaint behaviour becomes pertinent. With the wish to focus on the student perspective, the late emergence of the HE sector's quality based research into student satisfaction is also explored for relevance to emerging messages from complaint research.

The themes within the literature review prompt an extensive range of secondary questions; this is important for managing researcher bias and supporting a comprehensive approach to the resolution of the key research question. The nature of the questions dictates a quantitative or qualitative approach and this is evidenced in the research design.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **3.1 Methodology**

Research methodology here is determined by the purpose of the research query and the context within which the research is located. A significant influence is the paucity within the UK higher education research literature of student based empirical studies. The student ‘voice’ within complaints’ studies does become a feature until the sector itself starts to explore students’ views in some earnest from 2013. This gap shapes the research design by focusing on evidence of the student complainant’s viewpoint.

There is also a need for practical outcomes since the research aims to inform educational practice. This indicates a methodology influenced by pragmatism (Bassey, 1995; Denscombe, 2010; Plowright, 2011) where the individual researcher’s philosophical position is deemed less relevant:

...a pragmatic methodology invites you to carry out research that has a purpose, that is aimed at informing decisions and activities that impact on the world or that solve problems....so it follows that you will not be expected to start your research with a discussion of underpinning theories that characterise your own philosophical position. These do not drive the research: it is the research question that will determine the approach you take.

(Plowright, 2011, p.185)

Denscombe (2010) observes that a pragmatic approach is licence for researchers to be 'eclectic in their choice of methods' (p.130), reflecting a prior growing body of work (Silverman, 2005; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009) that argues against the historical quantitative/qualitative divide and promotes the use of the most appropriate research tools when responding to the research questions. Reflecting on the philosophy of the pragmatic approach Creswell (2014) concludes similarly that '...researchers are free to choose the methods, techniques, and procedures of research that best meet their needs and purposes.' (Creswell, 2014, p.11). This can mean alignment with a mixed-methods approach. The pragmatic influence is not driven by a wish to avoid the paradigm debate but a recognition of the need to formulate secondary research questions and to achieve practical outcomes to support practitioners.

As a result of their research with doctoral students Drake and Heath (2008) conclude that 'neutrality is not achievable' (p.141). It is also recognised (Smyth and Holian, 2008) that researchers who operate within their own institution offer a unique insight to the research topic due to their detailed knowledge of institutional culture and are therefore well placed to effect improvements in practice. This does not negate the researcher's duty to be sensitive to personal bias. Thus methodology here acknowledges the need to manage the risk to objectivity of this researcher's personal exposure to the research topic of some 20 years; the use of research tools that encourage reflexivity and safeguard authenticity are preferred.

The key research question in the study - **What influences students to submit formal complaints?** - seeks to identify the factors that motivate complaint behaviour from the student view only. 'What' aims to understand the issues that initiate institutional level

complaints within the context of the student experience. Students study within a particular culture of the university; at the same time they may live socially in an alternative culture. Their response to incidents is shaped by these communities and is potentially complex and inconsistent. Methodology therefore seeks influences that could be relevant only to individual students when pursuing their own complaint. Consequently, from an ontological view, reality in the complaint environment is constructed by the individual and the response is based on the student's perception. Whilst a quantitative approach satisfies the statistical element of the volume and nature of complaints, a primarily qualitative enquiry is favoured for behavioural enquiry which, as Greener (2011) argues, produces '...data that is closer to the research participant. It is able to provide the granular detail that quantitative research, which is often associated with large data sets crossing several sites, cannot provide (p.94).' Within the qualitative framework the supporting foundation is that of interpretivism which recognises that reality is 'constructed in the minds of people and reinforced through their interactions with each other' (Denscombe, 2010, p.121). Since the complaint experience may vary with the individual, each individual's story has merit. It is the role of research methods to facilitate an understanding of the individual similarities and differences to form a view of the issues influencing behaviour and how they might be addressed. Thus methodology reflects the emphasis of the research on discovering the perspective of the student complainant.

Methodology is also shaped by the nature of the secondary research questions which, as indicated in Table 2 below, dictate a quantitative or qualitative methodology. This anticipates a sequential approach with any issues of relevance emerging from an initial quantitative review being addressed via the subsequent qualitative process. Thus a small-

scale quantitative focused profiling of the complainants themselves aims to identify aspects of the sample complainants that might be explored further via qualitative analysis.

Research Area	Secondary Research Question	Research Process
<i>The complainants:</i>	Does the volume and profile of student complainants at Riverside University reflect the national picture?	Quantitative – secondary research from institutional dataset
	What is the personal profile of student complainants (gender/ethnicity/status)?	Quantitative – primary research from institutional student records system
	How many times have complainants submitted formal complaints at university level?	Qualitative approach via interview
<i>The complaint issues:</i>	What are Riverside University's students complaining about?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts
	What do complainants think the university can reasonably expect from them as students?	Qualitative – student interviews
	Do students' complaints reflect any concern about employment?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts
	Do complaints reflect any issues relating to student feedback or involvement in course delivery?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts
	What outcomes are complainants seeking from their complaint submission?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts
	Do students' complaints reflect any concerns relating to contact time with academic staff?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts

Research Area	Secondary Research Question	Research Process
<i>The complaint experience:</i>	What does the student complainant feel about their experience of the university's complaint process?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts and student interviews
	Do international students have any difficulties approaching the complaints process that might not be experienced by non-EEA students?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts and student interviews
	Do students seek help with the complaints process and who supports them?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts and student interviews
	Do students have any concerns about submitting a formal complaint?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts but anticipated primarily from student interviews
	In what way do students' emotions impact complaint behaviour?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts and student interviews
	Do students discuss their complaints with university staff during the complaint process?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts and student interviews
<i>The customer/consumer experience:</i>	Do students consider themselves as customers of the university?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts and student interviews
	Do students believe they have any rights as a student of the university?	Qualitative - student interviews
	Is the 'student as customer' concept evident from students themselves?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts and student interviews
	Are tuition fees perceived to be providing good value for money by student complainants?	Qualitative – analysis of students' complaint texts and student interviews
	Is the student an experienced consumer such that they arrive at university accustomed to complaining in other areas of their life?	Qualitative – student interviews



Research Area	Secondary Research Question	Research Process
	What, if any expectations, do students have of the university?	Qualitative – student interviews
	What do students think of the university’s approach to ‘customer care’?	Qualitative – student interviews

**Table 2: Addressing secondary research questions**

It is of note that students submitting complaints formally to the university are not constrained in their approach. They are not required to complete a proforma; they are simply asked to put concerns in writing, against a set of specific criteria if the complaint concerns the results of an examination board. This gives the student capacity to express themselves in an individual way. Text analysis is the key method for exploring complaint issues and illuminating the customer perception and the complaint experience. A qualitative analysis of all student complaint documentation submitted at university level during the period 2006-2007 to 2009-2010 inclusive is critical to the research.

It is possible that students construct their complaints’ submissions to secure support for their desired outcome. Research design therefore places emphasis on the further investigation of issues emerging from complaints’ texts. Individual interviews with student complainants are deemed important as a means of corroborating messages regarding the complaint and the student experience evidenced through text analysis. Interviews are particularly relevant to address Charmaz’ (2009) point that ‘Knowledge rests on social constructions’ (p.130) and that an individual’s beliefs and interpretations are often influenced by social experiences that unknowingly determine their reactions.

### **3.2 Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval is an early consideration for the insider-researcher since the imposition of constraints due to ethics concerns might shape research design. Ethical approval is a requisite of both Riverside University, the institution in which the research is set and the Open University as research sponsor.

Riverside University's Research Ethics Committee requires the exclusion of current students: there is concern the nature of the researcher's role may give rise to the mistaken impression that former complaints can be revisited. A further constraint is student information in Riverside's student records system commencing only from 2005-2006. Since students' complaints are anecdotally linked with rises in tuition fees, the first year of research is determined as 2006-2007, the year in which students are subject to 'top up' fees. The latest academic year to be researched is 2009-2010 with students on traditional three year degree programmes graduating in 2011-2012, the year in which data collection commences. The registration period for complainants in the final year of research is checked resulting in two complainants being discounted as they continue to higher degrees. The research sample therefore encompasses complaints submitted across a period of four academic years, 2006-2007 to 2009-2010.

Ethical clearance by the Open University is subject to strengthening the independence of the researcher role by requiring the research to be introduced to ex-students by a third party. The Dean of the Service handling complaints at Riverside agrees to do this and also acts as an ongoing point of contact to address any concerns that participants might have as the research progresses. Access to student work is confirmed by Riverside's Data Protection Officer as being within the scope of the data protection authority signed by students on enrolment;

students' personal information required to analyse the characteristics of the body of student complainants is supplied to the researcher on an anonymous basis by university staff. All students who agree to be interviewed return a consent form which confirms the anonymity of the study and that participation will have no impact on any complaint previously submitted or any future complaint if subsequently re-enrolled as an active student.

Research must not cause pain or distress to those being researched, and there is a duty on social researchers to think ahead and foresee any aspects of involvement with the research that could potentially cause mental distress or physical discomfort.

Denscombe, 2010, p.64)

Ethical clearance should be a safeguard in meeting Denscombe's caveat on research but as Hallowell et al proffer (2005) '... it is time we put paid to the popular misconception that research can be, and is, an objective and emotionally detached process' (p.11). Emotional issues can arise that have not been foreseen and cannot be accommodated. The scale of the emotional response of some interview participants in this research is not anticipated; this emerges from the research and as such cannot be addressed in advance. The effect on the researcher (Chapter Eight, Reflections on research) is significant and ultimately a positive influence for change. However, the impact on participants of returning to such an emotional experience is not known; no complaints have been received by the research supervisory member of staff at Riverside.

### **3.3 Research methods**

Good social science is problem-driven and not methodology-driven in the sense that it employs those methods which for a given problematic best help answer the research questions at hand. (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.26-27)

Isolating the student perspective requires a framework that will allow the employment of a repertoire of qualitative tools if necessary. The research framework is a case study approach, drawing on grounded theory techniques to prepare data from written complaint texts and online student interviews for analysis.

#### **3.3.1 Case study**

Although the central research question with its behavioural focus might indicate an ethnographic approach, the ethical constraints permitting access to former students places restrictions on the nature of the research framework. A case study approach is therefore deemed the most appropriate vehicle to explore complaint behaviour located in the past but seeking current comment.

There are arguments for the centrality of the case study in social research (Stake, 1994) and the flexibility it offers as an approach that need not align with any research tradition (Simons, 2009). It has been argued (Burton, 2000) that case study research is not well defined and requires clarity about the nature of the case in question. Yin (2012), however, advocates a case study in a less defined scenario where the research is a response to why, or how, something is happening and the unit of study is a 'bounded entity' (p.6) such as an institution. A key characteristic is that research takes place in a real life scenario. Yin (2012) notes that case study research is set within an institutions 'natural setting' (p.5); Hammersley and

Gomm (2000) refer to a 'commitment to authenticity' (p.6) and Simons (2009) refers to 'real life' (p.21) in a comprehensive definition of case study research:

Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a real life context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic (as in a thesis), programme, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy developments, professional practice and civil or community action.

(Simons, 2009, p.21)

Case study as context sensitive is relevant to research within the cultural complexity of a higher education environment. As a research method it facilitates the exploration of varying facets of the experiences of the student body. Where evidence emerges that may require further exploration the researcher has scope to employ additional research tools. The unit of study is the body of students who submit formal complaints at institutional level at Riverside University during the four years subsequent to the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006-2007; the university as an institution being the environment that might influence complaint behaviour.

### **3.3.2 Generating documentary data: Grounded Theory (GT) techniques**

The critical documentary evidence in this case study is the original complaint correspondence submitted by students to university level staff when their complaint has not been addressed to their satisfaction by their faculty staff. These are what Plowright (2011) terms the 'highest order interpretational artefacts' (p.95) that reveal a student's

understanding of a particular experience and, according to Plowright, their 'ideological values' (p.105).

Analysis of these texts is also important from the perspective of the manner in which students present complaints. Prior research (Chen et al, 2011) considers complaint vocabulary from a linguistic and cultural perspective, observing that complaints by foreign students reflect cultural assumptions about the academic role; on a similar theme Plowright (2011) promotes 'critical discourse' (p.101) as a means of referencing social power differentials that could be relevant to the university/student relationship. Discourse analysis is an extensive research field in its own right but text analysis has to be alert to the use of language by students for any additional context it might provide about student perceptions of their relationship with academic staff.

Understanding the personal motivation of other individuals requires a method that is able to extract and interpret data as objectively as possible; this is particularly important with the researcher having intimate involvement with student complaint cases at Riverside University. Yin (2009) observes that the case study approach has been criticised for lack of rigour, in part due to the lack of texts that specify procedures for carrying out case studies. Eisenhardt (1989) however details an inductive approach using case study methodology that emphasises the close tie to data as the driver for theory development. Eisenhardt's emphasis is on maximising data collections methods to support triangulation and encouraging a quantitative/qualitative mix which she perceives to be synergistic in signposting the researcher to emerging theory.

...a key feature of theory building case research is the freedom to make adjustments during the data collection process. (Eisenhardt, 1989, p.539)

She notes that differing types of data collection offer unique insights that will either corroborate a finding or offer deeper understanding of the issues. Most interestingly Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that a case study approach can foster novel theory since ‘Creative insight often arises from the juxtaposition of contradictory or paradoxical evidence’ (p.546). She argues that reconciling different sources of data works to remove any initial researcher bias and develop theory that is closely linked to the data.

Whilst recognising the strengths outlined here, employing a variety of data sources to encompass multiple perspectives is not directly relevant to this case study; the emphasis is on the student voice and thus the views of members of the university community involved in the complaints process other than students are deemed to detract from that focus and are not considered. Research methods are however designed to align with Eisenhardt’s (1989) emphasis on the interlinking of data.

Andrade (2009) argues that case study method used from an interpretive perspective gives no guidance about how theory can be developed but that using GT method within a case study is successful in developing formal outcomes. Bryman and Burgess (1994), reflecting on GT’s ubiquitous nature also promote its wider benefit as a qualitative research tool:

Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding and provide a meaningful guide to action.

(Bryman and Burgess, 1994, p.12).

Although they argue that theory is rarely generated via GT, they do note that the method is important for identifying the relevant concepts that will shed light on theory and also the methods that will most appropriately identify these concepts. Greener’s (2011) arguments

for the use of a GT approach are particularly relevant. In underlining the wide variants and complexities involved in discourse analysis he notes that the analysis of text aligns with the coding strategies of GT: using GT tools offers a wider perspective that better supports the research aim. Greener's (2011) belief that strict adherence to the mechanics of either method is unnecessary also supports the pragmatic philosophy underpinning the case study:

What is important is not that researchers focus on trying to do the purest form of Grounded Theory or discourse analysis that they are able to, but instead that they come up with coherent and rigorous approaches to examining their texts that produce interesting results.

(Greener, 2001, p.100)

Vanderstoep and Johnston's (2009) view that 'How research is evaluated depends on the perspective of the researcher' (p.179), is a reminder that the researcher's significant exposure to the student complaint experience at Riverside University carries risk of potential preconceptions influencing the analytical process. Detailed coding supports a review of individual complaints that aims to detract from any influence of the researcher's tacit knowledge. The affirmation of a GT approach as a rigorous means of supporting objectivity is therefore an important one within the interpretive approach of this case study and a determinant for using GT techniques as a significant research tool within the research design.

Tan (2010) identifies the difficulties for the researcher of using GT given the varying interpretations of the method that have evolved since the initial 1967 study by Glaser and Strauss (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Glaser, 2007; Charmaz, 2009). The recommendation is that researchers should be explicit about the elements of the GT approach being employed if conclusions are to be judged valid. Strauss and Corbin (1998) are also



clear that whilst GT as a research tool provides a systematic framework for the interpretation of data, employment does not have to mean a commitment to a full GT case study. As Corbin states:

Many of the procedures, such as making comparisons, asking generative questions and theoretical sampling, are not theoretically based .....and can be used by anyone regardless of whether their research aim is theory building; rich, thick description; or case study analysis.

(Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.17).

The inductive nature of the coding method might indicate a natural alignment with the GT practice of avoiding theoretical review until the core concept emerges. Later researchers in the GT tradition have challenged this, in particular with the promotion of Informed Grounded Theory (Thornberg, 2012). An early and continuing engagement with the research literature is however more influenced by Yin's (2012) expectation that researchers must understand the rival explanations in the subject arena; here higher education stakeholders readily link fees payment with an expectation of students' complaints. Notions of the student as a customer and an increase in costs are viewed as causal drivers of complaints by staff in the higher education sector. These areas have to be addressed if recommendations from the research are to be considered relevant by staff at Riverside University. It is therefore important to stress that whilst this case study calls on GT techniques it is not a Grounded Theory case study. GT techniques are harnessed to support the credibility of a primarily qualitative framework with an interpretive focus.

### **3.3.3. Online interviews**

Interviews provide opportunity to understand complainants' views of their position as a student in a higher education institution and so elucidate issues around the conceptual framework of the research which seeks to understand the wider strategic issue of the student/university relationship.

Access to ex-students in this case study is challenging and interviews via online means are therefore explored. In moving to an online interview environment researchers (Jowett et al, 2011; Gruber et al, 2008) note the advantages over conventional interview formats of negating the varying resource costs involved with the face-to-face model and the potential for participants to be influenced by the interviewer's physical presence. The online environment offers a means to minimise the potential for bias within the interview. Reppel et al (2008) support this and highlight a body of literature promoting the anonymity of online interviewing as lending itself to a less inhibited interview response. Advantages are also seen in the potential to promote reflexivity and a more in-depth personal response from interviewees (James, 2007), as well as 'the iterative value of email interviewing' (Burns, 2010, p.10) whereby the researcher can respond readily to identified gaps in participants' responses. These are persuasive arguments for qualitative research taking an interpretive stance and attempting to understand an individual's behavioural response. Online technology is perceived to be a supportive addition to conventional research tools:

Current indications are that emergent media technologies such as email interviews, like other new media innovations, do not diminish older forms, but rather enrich the array of investigatory tools available for social research today.

(Burns, 2010 p.1)

Silverman (2011) also promotes internet technology particularly the ‘elasticity of time’ (p.119) as being a key advantage, allowing the researcher to undertake research in delayed or real time dependent on personal preferences and those of the research subjects. Silverman (2011) additionally proffers that internet exchanges provide an audit trail of language exchanges that may reflect the particular cultural and social reality of the research topic. This offers complementary support to the documentary analysis of students’ complaint submissions in terms of identifying any indication of a student discourse around the complaint process.

Prior students in the research sample are therefore invited to participate in online interviews by written email, online via Skype or any alternative ‘chat’ facility.

#### **3.3.4 ‘Laddering’**

The interviews need a framework in order to address the matters raised within the literature review but to also respond to practitioner preoccupation with rising tuition fees and customer values. This requires structured questions to ensure coverage. The base questions for the interview are attached at Appendix RD.1. These are supplemented by matters raised as a result of documentary analysis and reflected on in Theoretical memoranda. However, a specified framework can turn the interview into what Greener (2011) refers to as ‘...a form of interactive questionnaire....’ (p.86). This minimises opportunity for the ex-student to voluntarily proffer personal views that could disclose attitudes to areas of complaint. Acknowledging the need to understand personal motivation, structured questions are planned in conjunction with a ‘laddering’ approach as the participants respond.

Drawing on a theoretical model introduced primarily for consumer research by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), ‘laddering’ is designed to analyse why customers have preference for

certain products. It is characterised by the consistent probing of an area of questioning - continuously asking 'why?' - until no further information is forthcoming. The approach has been used previously by Hart and Coates (2010) to determine the flow of questioning for research into the international student experience and ascertaining why students identify something as important in the complaint process.

Online interviewing offers scope to think carefully about the phrasing of questions to mimic the 'laddering' technique that is considered supportive to a research sample in which there could be a low response rate and when limited but rich data then becomes valuable:

As the 'laddering' technique attempts to achieve a deeper level of understanding on each case, it has been argued that researchers should not overly concern themselves with sample size. (Hart and Coates, 2010, p.210)

### **3.3.5 Final research design**

The final research design, as summarised at Figure 1, includes:

- i. a quantitative focused profiling of student complainants across the research period;
- ii. a small-scale quantitative analysis of the volume and nature of the complaint issues raised by student complainants at university level;
- iii. a qualitative analysis of all student complaint documentation submitted at university level during the period 2006-2007 and 2009-2010 inclusive, using GT techniques and with the aim of exploring issues emerging from (i) and (ii) above and the complaint experience as stated by students;

- iv. a qualitative analysis of the outcomes of individual online interviews with volunteer ex-student complainants drawn from the research period, to corroborate messages emerging from complaint documentation, address additional areas for research identified and provide opportunity to explore matters that cannot be confirmed via written text, such as how the complainant feels about the experience.

This emphasises a sequential research approach by which emerging evidence from one methodology can be authenticated through the subsequent process.

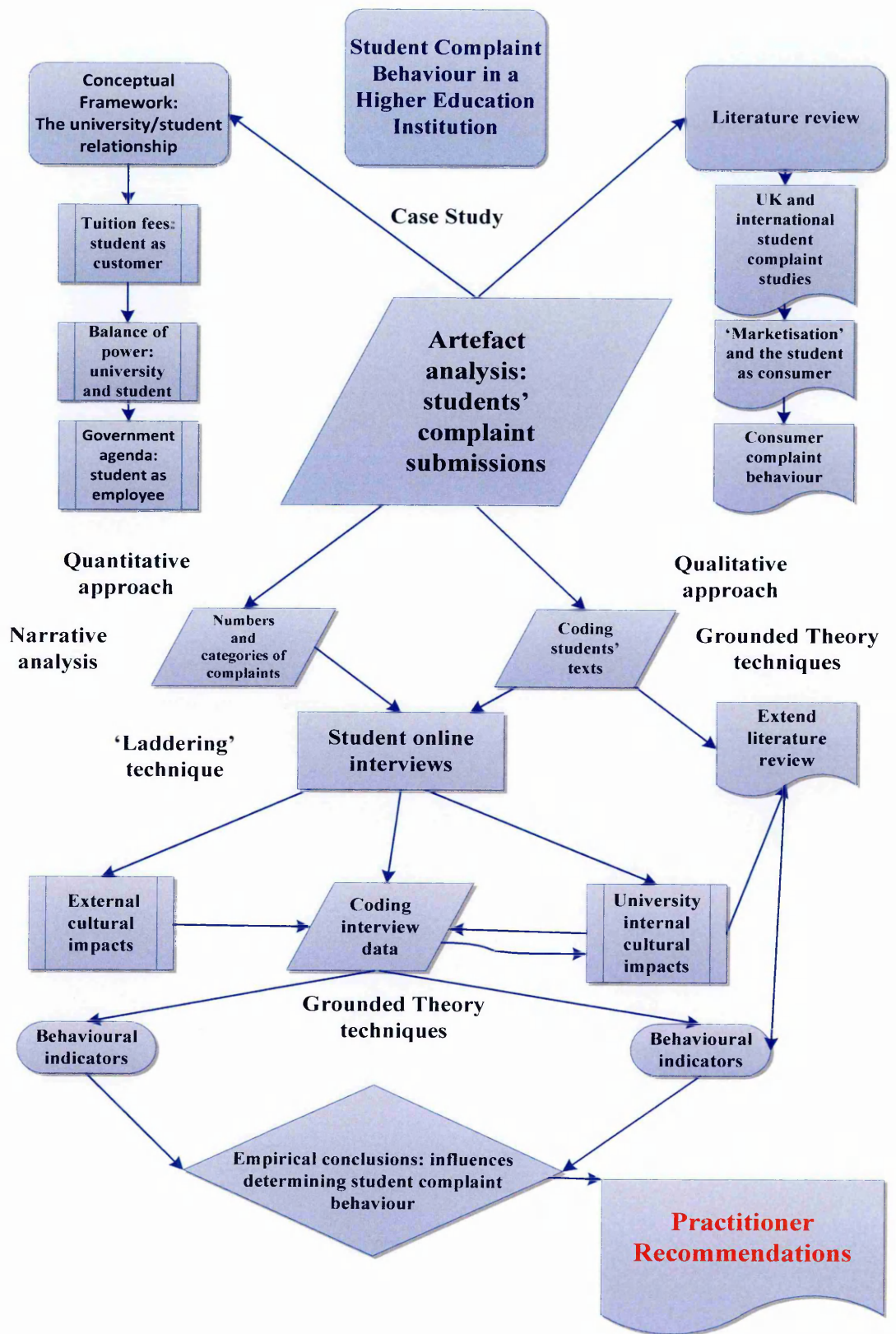


Figure 1: Planned research design

### 3.4 Authenticating strategies

‘Without rigour, research is worthless, becomes fiction and loses its utility.’

(Morse et al, 2002, p.14)

Taking an interpretive approach to analysis this case study regards reality as being constructed by the individual. The reality sought is a sense of the student experience of an event, or issue, at Riverside University that influences the decision to pursue a complaint and the subsequent experience of progressing that complaint. The approach to rigour in qualitative research is debated. Morse et al (2002) note, with concern, a shift from the concepts of reliability and validity that mark quantitative design as a result initially of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) early emphasis on credibility and dependability criteria. They believe this heralds an approach that evaluates research on completion when it is too late to address design shortcomings; they argue that rigour should be maintained through inbuilt verification strategies as the research progresses such that risks to credibility can be managed as they occur. The more flexible approach to assessing qualitative outcomes remains influential, with current researchers (Creswell, 2014; Venkatesh et al, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013; Silverman, 2013) arguing that measures such as credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability built in to research design do evidence the robustness of the process. Terminology replacing validity and reliability varies but the research design draws on this broader framework to introduce multiple means to authenticate data generation and interpretation.

One such strategy is triangulation which contributes to credibility. Stake (2008) argues that triangulation is about ‘diversity of perception’ (p.133) and how a phenomenon is observed from varying viewpoints; it supports clarity of understanding and minimises

misinterpretation. The research is constrained here by the focus on the student perspective but Yin's (2009) argument that the strength of case study is the ability to employ a range of evidence with a view to developing 'converging lines of inquiry' (p.115) reinforces the need to facilitate data triangulation. Yin (2012) recommends that three or more sources pointing to the same conclusion support the robustness of the conclusions. The potential for methodological triangulation is promoted via a sequential mixed methods approach with the outcomes of a small quantitative approach directing some of the qualitative data search. Within this research the emphasis is on the student perspective and thus triangulation seeks student focused corroboration. Analysis of student texts is explored in student interviews and, in line with Denscombe's (2010) suggestion that researchers should also check their findings with 'informed people' (p.148), feedback is planned from Riverside's Students' Union officers whose portfolio includes guidance to students on complaints issues.

Credibility is further enhanced with Silverman's (2013) 'refutability' principle to the fore:

This demands that we seek to refute assumed relations between phenomena. Then, only if we cannot refute the existence of a certain relationship are we in a position to speak about 'objective' knowledge. (Silverman, 2013, p.289)

Research design thus addresses proactively the prevalent view amongst HE practitioners that student complaint behaviour is encouraged by rises in tuition fees; this will support credibility from the perspective of administrative practitioners in particular.

The employment of GT techniques aims to assure the dependability of data emerging from the interrogation of complaint documentation and student interviews. However, in terms of data analysis, there remains the danger in qualitative research that the researcher's view



dominates the reporting process. Recent research demonstrates an acceptance of this and the need to manage the extent of the influence. Simons (2009) recognises the role of the researcher in interpreting data and that his/her values may impact on the research process; ultimately ‘...the one who writes the script often has a more powerful impact on the text’ (Simons, 2009, p.79). Corbin and Strauss go further:

‘But today we all know that objectivity in qualitative research is a myth.’

(Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.22).

This is qualified by the need for the researcher to be sensitive to the data and use experience to interpret it appropriately such that ‘findings are a product of data plus what the researcher brings to the analysis’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.22). The context within which the research takes place is influential and thus research cannot be neutral. Researchers must always interpret findings but GT techniques support the need to minimise any unconscious prejudices drawn from the researcher’s prior extensive experience of student complaint handling.

The interview process is potentially more contentious. Caution has been expressed about the growth of interviews in social science research, in particular in the tradition of ‘...the radical critique of interviews....’ (Gomm, 2008, p.89) which holds that the artificiality of the interview process means that outcomes simply describe what occurs at interview rather than represent the interview participants’ beliefs. Being outside of the conventional one-to-one format, the virtual environment of online interviews minimises any issue of power imbalance between the researcher and that of the former student and lends itself to an environment in which the student should not feel constrained by interviewer presence during the interview process.

Whilst there is then some acceptance by qualitative researchers that subjectivity may always prevail and that this does not necessarily diminish the research outcomes (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011), this aspect remains of concern for this case study. A potential gap in research to date is the absence of the student perspective. To assure the credibility of any conclusions that may be drawn about students' complaint behaviour it is vital that students' views are prominent. It is argued (Yilmaz 2013; Denscombe, 2010) that the provision of detailed description within qualitative research supports reader judgement of the authenticity of the setting being studied and data analysis therefore draws on the original students texts to provide what Yilmaz (2013) refers to as '...an accurate picture of the empirical world as it exists to those under investigation, rather than as he or she imagines it to be' (p.321).

Simons (2009) observes that 'particularisation' (p.24) - the detailed exploration of a single study to inform own practice rather than wider policy initiatives - is a legitimate aim and the application of the recommendations of the research to a wider population is not always relevant. However administrative practitioners across the higher education sector are a close knit group, with daily networking via mailbases; here they seek comment and support on what they perceive to be common issues. Practitioners view the management of the student experience as a shared problem. The outcomes of any research on contentious student issues are interpreted at local level and issues of generalisation are therefore addressed within the research design.

Denscombe (2010) makes a clear distinction between generalisation and transferability. Empirical generalisation focuses on the sample being used so that consideration can be given to how far it is representative of a wider population. Transferability relies on having sufficient information about the characteristics of the case in order to judge if the conclusions

can be applied more widely. Within this study the particulars of the student sample and the nature of the case are important so that external judgement can be made about how far the mix is replicated in other institutions. Schofield (2000) quotes a number of researchers who promote the need for qualitative research to provide sufficient 'thick descriptions' (p.76) for readers to be able to judge the characteristics of the research that align with other scenarios and determine how far the outcomes of one research project can be generalised to another. Riverside University shares characteristics with other universities across the higher education sector. Details of the nature of the student body and the particular sample under review will aid practitioners in the UK higher education system to determine if the conclusions and recommendations arising from the research are relevant to their own institution. This informal concept aligns with Vanderstoep and Johnston's (2009) view that a successful qualitative study produces such intense descriptive data that the reader is persuaded that the researcher's conclusions are entirely legitimate and is able to relate to the outcomes of the study as being familiar. This *aha!* (p.170) phenomenon, formally termed phenomenological validity, is the point at which the reader recognises the nature of the behaviour under discussion:

When we achieve phenomenological validity, the interpretation of the data speaks to the lived experience of the research participants and others who identify with them.

(Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009, p.170)

Data analysis therefore keeps close to the original student text to facilitate practitioners in comparing issues raised by complainants to their own experience.

### 3.5 Design implementation

Having reviewed the variants of GT employed across ‘the grounded theory generations’ (Birks and Mills, 2011, p.2), this case study moves forward using the inductive emphasis of GT techniques for data generation and subsequent analysis:

- i. the coding of students’ complaints texts;
- ii. the development of a Conditional Relationship Guide (Wilson Scott, 2004) to establish the characteristics of concepts generated through coding and their inter-relationships;
- iii. facilitating the comparison of the categories and concepts emerging from codes via theoretical memoranda.

#### 3.5.1 Coding

The coding of student complaint texts is an intense process and represents an amalgam of coding practice across GT:

- i. *Initial Coding.* Here the early coding of written text takes place on a segment basis to narrow the focus. Saldana (2013) suggests that ‘in vivo’ and process coding are usually employed for this early exploration of the data and that the provisional coding areas may be revised as research continues. The intent is that the definitive Initial Codes that emerge then lead to the next stage of the GT approach, focused coding;
- ii. *Focused coding.* At the intermediate stage the initial codes are reviewed to consider how they might link to form summary categories, referred to as Key Points in this case study. Saldana (2013) suggests this second cycle

encompasses primarily focused (Charmaz, 2006) and axial (Strauss, 1987) coding. These varying terminologies describe the process through which categories start to be defined and continue to be developed through ‘theoretical saturation’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) when no new codes are being generated around a particular category;

- iii. *Defining Core Categories (CC)*. GT aligned to the original proponents moves into the final stage of identifying a single Core Category identified across all categories which drives theory development. Whilst this concept of a single category or theoretical code is still promoted by modern GT practitioners (Hernandez, 2009), Birks and Mills (2011) argue that the importance of a Core Category has lessened through the variants of GT and quotes Charmaz (2006) as an example of ‘...a broader approach being taken that describes how categories and their sub-categories integrate together to form an abstract grounded theory of a substantive area of enquiry’ (Birks and Mills, 2011, p.100). Research design therefore expects to see a range of Core Categories that will start to explain student complaint behaviour.

The full detail of the coding process is outlined at Appendix RD.2.

Coding methodology concludes with the isolation of Core Categories on the basis of Saldana’s (2012) ‘summative power’ (p.227) that is a category’s ability to encapsulate a range of codes and sub-codes. The final 18 individual Core Categories emerging have thematic commonality. They are therefore grouped around three of the Core Categories

that take on the role of Conceptual Core Categories (CCC) as a result of their own evident summative power as outlined in Table 3 below:

<u>Core Categories (CC)</u>	<u>Conceptual Core Categories (CCC)</u>
CC1 <i>Being disadvantaged as an international student</i>	
CC5 <i>Expressing dissatisfaction with the complaint process</i>	
CC6 <i>Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice</i>	CCC10 <i>Encountering a hostile culture</i>
CC7 <i>Being subject to unfair treatment</i>	
CC15 <i>Experiencing administrative errors</i>	
CC2 <i>Submitting a deferential complaint</i>	
CC3 <i>Experiencing an extenuating circumstance</i>	
CC8 <i>Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail</i>	
CC12 <i>Experiencing poor communications</i>	CCC16 <i>Tell me what to do!</i>
CC18 <i>Experiencing mental health issues</i>	
CC13 <i>Challenging the university</i>	
CC9 <i>Involving a third party</i>	
CC14 <i>Deserving better outcomes</i>	
CC4 <i>Confirming adherence to university procedures</i>	CCC11 <i>Expecting a qualification by right -                   ‘The Deal’</i>
CC17 <i>Promoting personal effort</i>	

Table 3: Core Categories 2006-2007 to 2009-2010, grouped by Conceptual Core Category

Thus research methods isolate varying categories that, woven together, offer explanations of student complaint behaviour. Categories and concepts are used interchangeably by GT practitioners; Birks and Mills (2011) accept this but conclude that one of the rules of analysis is that everything is a concept. This determines a need for clarity in the category/concept relationship which is offered by Strauss and Corbin (1998):

A category should be sufficiently developed in terms of properties and dimensions to demonstrate range of variability as a concept.

(Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.158)

A category may have the capacity to permit a range of concepts to emerge which explain behaviour associated with that category in particular circumstances. This according to Silverman (2010) builds theory with an operational focus which supports the practitioner in enhancing processes:

...a theory is best understood as a set of concepts used to define and/or explain some phenomenon. A criterion for adopting a theory is usefulness.

(Silverman, 2010, p.202)

It is therefore important that the final stage of 'Defining Core Categories' is clear about the characteristics of the Core Categories so that conclusions can be drawn about the nature of student complaint behaviour. The characteristics of the Core Categories are determined through the development of the Conditional Relationship Guide advocated by Wilson Scott (2004) and supported by associated theoretical memoranda.



### **3.5.2 The Conditional Relationship Guide**

The introduction of the Conditional Relationship Guide is influenced by the GT studies of Wilson Scott (2004), Wilson Scott and Howell (2008) and Howell (2009). Developing this originally in 2004, Wilson Scott (2004) draws on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) Conditional Matrix and uses a framework of standard questions to specify the characteristics of each Core Category. She argues that understanding the relationship between categories and codes is not an intuitive process for the researcher and that 'Answering these questions weaves the loose array of concepts and categories we unravelled and sorted in open coding back together into a pattern' (p.115). Responding to the questions requires a return to Initial Codes and the student text giving rise to those codes, in order to summarise an understanding of the context of the Key Point Code, now forming a Core Category. Each Core Category is considered and explained under each of these areas. This fleshes out the Category and begins to reveal the influences on the student's complaint initiative that may not be articulated well within the original formal written submission.

Wilson-Scott supplements her GT research with a Reflective Coding Matrix which builds on the data in the Conditional Relationship Guide to isolate the characteristics of a single Core Category. Compiling those characteristics 'reveals the story' (p.13). Flyvberg (2006) advises that rich case studies should not be distilled since this detracts from the messages particularly for the practitioner. He argues that 'The goal is to allow the case study to be different things to different people' (p.23) and that reference to the original data allows the reader to be fully sensitive to the issues involved rather than simply being exposed to a summary position. Subsequent analytical narrative explores the implications of the Conditional Relationship Guide for student complaint behaviour and in doing so remains

close to the student voice by drawing on the Core Categories and Key Point Codes that reflect student views.

The Conditional Relationship Guide is attached at Appendix RD.3.

### **3.5.3 Theoretical memoranda**

A theoretical memorandum is drawn up for each Core Category and used to explore the emerging relationships between overarching Conceptual Core Categories, individual Core Categories and to progress theoretical sampling. Theoretical memoranda play an important role in the direction of analysis.

Grounded theory methodology promotes the role of memo writing to reflect on research progress:

Theory articulation is facilitated through an extensive and systematic process of memoing...the writing of theoretical memos is the core stage in the process of generating theory. (Glaser and Holton, 2007, p.62)

Informal memoing is used initially alongside data generation, starting simply as single lines of comment retained in a spreadsheet at the pre-coding stage. However theoretical memoranda supporting the Conditional Relationship Guide are more formalised, draw on extracts from students' complaints and can include relevant literature references. Wilson Scott (2004) suggests aligning with student text as a means of avoiding '...drifting into the meaning of the researcher, possibly blending researcher meaning with that of the participants' (p.116). Theoretical memoranda therefore draw on individual student's

comments in their complaint submissions and relevant student text is transferred to the Guide itself to support the statements made about each Category.

Theoretical memoranda are also important for isolating additional research areas to supplement the issues identified across the literature review for further exploration at the interview stage. Bryant and Charmaz (2011) place emphasis on theoretical sampling as the means of underpinning the credibility of final categories/concepts and each memorandum reflects on the relationship between categories and aims to identify areas for further exploration by way of subsequent interviews or potential gaps in the literature.

All theoretical memoranda are enclosed at Appendix RD.4.

### **3.6 Design challenges**

The implementation of this case study meets with challenges that require a revised approach and cause some retrospective reflection on whether methods might have been employed differently.

#### **3.6.1 Ethics/software support**

Minor issues relating to ethics documentation and lack of software support for GT analysis prove irritants in the final reporting and are testimony to the need to give careful consideration to the end product at the start of any research journey.

Interview participants sign an ethical clearance form which confirms that extracts from their interview may be used but that the interview transcript will be destroyed within six months of the research completion. This anticipates that ex-students may not wish such personal

data to be retained publicly on an indefinite basis. It subsequently means that full copies of transcripts cannot be used to evidence the content of student feedback.

Gibson and Hartman (2014) advise that software should only be used to support GT where there is a specific strategy to enhance the theoretical process. Within the context of a single researcher interrogating data that can be broken down by academic year and a subject matter that has commonality this proves entirely manageable, indeed there are advantages in having hard copy data readily available to view. The sophistication of NVIVO software to support the coding process is not operationally necessary but it does aid data presentation; coding demonstrated via a tabular 'Word' format lacks visual appeal. On reflection NVIVO might have been usefully employed to demonstrate the authenticity of the coding process.

### **3.6.2 Response rate**

All complainants (91) are invited to take part in the interview process but after two formal requests only seven respondents participate. Some correspondence is returned with address data out of date but reasons for lack of engagement by ex-students can only be speculative. Prior research (Griffin et al, 2011) recognises the significance of some small payment for an increased sample response but a financial incentive is not considered appropriate; it is important for authenticity to secure participants with genuine views and a wish to promote improved practice.

Moving forward positively is determined by the importance of student sample size in the context of this study. The relevance for Flick (2006) is the research question and the nature of the size of the sample needed to respond to that research question; limiting claims to generalization via a small sample can still produce a meaningful study. Prior research in

the sector complaints arena is also small-scale. Hart and Coates (2010) interview ten students in their cross cultural case study, but underpinned by an effective 'laddering' technique; the Cooper-Hind and Taylor (2012) study encompasses all current students in a large UK university who enquire about the complaints process across an academic year, totalling 27 complainants. Within the context of complaints handling at Riverside, the individual complainant is perceived as a risk to the university. Thus each case is important and the crucial point is securing 'participants who will be able to contribute meaningfully to the research' (Curtis and Curtis, 2011, p. 36).

Triangulation of data is also compromised by lack of response from ex-student officers of Riverside's Students Union. Just four officers are in post across the sample academic years but despite having contact addresses, and with at least one working in higher education, only a single former officer agrees to participate. They withdraw later due to personal circumstances. Hammersley's (2008) advice is to the fore when considering the impact of this. In a critique of qualitative research Hammersley (2008) observes that the essence of triangulation as a means of minimising error in the outcomes of the research tools used is now corrupt and used simply as an additional source of data, rather than as a mechanism for supporting credibility. Reflection on this statement brings an appreciation that in a case study which places emphasis on the experience of the complainants themselves, the views of those who may not have experienced the complaint process personally is actually of questionable research value. The failure to secure comment from Students' Union officers is thus not deemed critical to the authenticity of research outcomes.

Further challenges arise associated with researching in an online interview environment.

### 3.6.3 CMC and FTF!

Electronic research brings new terminology of computer-mediated communication (CMC), face-to-face alternatives (FTF), synchronous (real time) or asynchronous (delayed) exchanges and also unanticipated reactions.

Prior research (Reppel et al, 2008; James, 2007) identifies online interviews as a constructive addition to conventional research methods and, used in conjunction with an intended 'laddering' technique, conducive to securing useful rich data from a small sample (Hart and Coates, 2010). Mann and Stewart (2000) emphasise that issues with technology can dominate. Unexpectedly, but in line with the experiences of Jowett et al (2011) who encountered varying technological issues with an online interview study, participants can lack confidence operating in an electronic environment. Complainants are asked if they prefer to receive research questions via email or for interviews to be conducted via Skype, or a preferred 'chat' facility. Student 67G, a dyslexic participant, wants to be interviewed in person; she has difficulties typing and advises that she has no idea how to use a chat facility. One individual suggests a telephone call to limit further exchanges, only to subsequently fail to engage with the process at all. Six of the respondents have a preference to be sent an email containing the full range of questions. The return of responses is fraught with difficulties with reply emails disappearing in 'spam' on both sides and technological challenges: *I'm having issues with modern technology my computer won't let me set up settings to just forward you the file...* Student 67G; *Sorry for delay....living in a caravan which only has signal when it feels like it...* Student 67C.

Although these problems are overcome, an electronic dialogue proves more difficult than FTF interviewing. It is difficult to judge how sensitively some questions are received in an

online environment and, given the emotions raised with some of the respondents, there is concern about longer term impact on the respondent in addressing an issue that is clearly distressful.

James and Busher (2006) prefer online research tools on the basis that virtual exchanges promote reflection and thus support in-depth interviews. However some ex-complainants in this research are dismissive in terms of their responses. Having completed the questions at one sitting with minimal words Student 90H signs off with *Best of Luck* and refuses to respond to follow up questions. This approach is shown at [Appendix RD.5](#). Forwarding additional questions to an online address can feel intrusive and there is some discomfort when pursuing a fuller understanding of a student's experience in a proactive way. The intended 'laddering' approach, employed successfully by Hart and Coates (2010) using face-to-face interviews, seems aggressive via email and is not pursued. This setback is ameliorated by some of the interview participants themselves whose behaviour mimics the experience of James and Busher (2006) and McCoyd and Kerson (2006). Interviewing social workers by email the latter are surprised to find that respondents are not constrained in expressing their feelings and find responses to be '...genuine, thoughtful and insightful, while still conveying emotion' (p.396). They reflect that email offers a sense of privacy and protection not available in a face-to-face scenario. Some ex-complainants prove to be forthcoming in their responses; an extract of an example is shown at [Appendix RD.6](#). However, dependent on subject matter, researchers should consider the wisdom of offering participants a choice of approach and stipulate a chat facility as the required medium.

In common with the FTF approach, there is a need to establish a rapport with the interviewee to support confidence in the process but this is a challenge in a virtual environment:

The expression of empathy was found to be particularly difficult without the aid of nonverbal communication and was expressed instead in the form of reciprocal disclosure. (Jowett et al, 2011, p.261)

It is easy to identify with Jowett et al's (2011) struggle with empathy. An interview focused on email can appear flat and the use of emoticons inappropriate in a situation where the respondent is detailing personally distressful matters. The researcher feels pressured to express rapport through alluding to mutual personal experiences albeit at a superficial level, such as the experience of moving house: an example is at [Appendix RD.7](#). There is danger this informality can lead to a breach of researcher objectivity. An exchange that might be light and insignificant in an FTF interview seems to take on more meaning through a written exchange and it may be preferable for online researchers to guard against revealing personal information when contacting respondents via electronic means. Writing in 2002, Hewson et al proffer that 'Both email and chat-based approaches to interviewing differ from traditional methods, most starkly in that there is little scope for using extra-linguistic cues in online interactions.....The effects of such factors constitute an area of research in itself' (p.46). Over ten years later, in an environment where there is an assumption about IT literacy, the management of online interviewing continues to warrant ongoing review to ensure it remains an effective research tool and, as evidenced by Bennett et al (2008), assumptions should not be made about the skills of the 'digital natives' (p.775).

Having overcome any initial systems issues there is no evidence that those being interviewed are uncomfortable with discussions in an electronic environment or that responses reflect anything other than a true representation of events from the interviewees' viewpoint. Interview texts are not coded but are reviewed to determine any relationship with the Core



Categories raised and summarised in the Conditional Relationship Guide. This moves the case study in to the analytical phase.

### **3.7 Chapter conclusion**

A case study approach aims to ‘understand the complex relationship between factors as they operate within a particular social setting’ (Denscombe, 2014, p.4). The aim of the research design here is to explore the experience of the student complainant within the higher education setting of Riverside University. An imperative is to manage the risk to objectivity of the researcher’s extensive prior practical experience of the phenomena. An eclectic approach is proposed, incorporating quantitative and qualitative analysis of complainants’ text-based submissions; grounded theory techniques to determine the motivators and nature of complaint behaviour; a ‘laddering’ approach within online interviews to explore complainants personal feelings about their complaint experience and supporting verification through online interviews with prior officers of Riverside’s Students’ Union officers who are referral points for student complainants.

The application of quantitative and qualitative methods is sequential. While the quantitative element is limited, it is important for establishing Riverside University complainants within the national context and identifying areas that are significant for qualitative focus, notably the volume of complaints relating to degree classification matters and the potential impact of the ethnic diversity of the sample. However the direction of research is then impacted by lack of engagement by prior students. With only an 8% complainant response for interview participation the intention to apply GT technique to interview texts to contrast the behavioural messages emerging from the coding analysis of student texts is frustrated. Online interviews with participants’ preferred medium of e-mail proves inappropriate for a

‘laddering’ style of questioning. Personal reflection determines that the value of any messages from individual student complainants should not be underestimated. As analysis with the annual volume of complaints in the HE sector highlights, student complainants are small in number but significant in impact.

The purpose of interviews in the case study is to provide a secondary data source pointing to the nature of complaint behaviour emerging from the GT analysis of 91 ex-students’ complaint submissions. Individual interview participants respond in line with prior research (Das et al, 2011; McCoyd and Kerson, 2006) that evidences online interviewees as more open in response than those involved in the conventional interview format. There is thus some rich data available within a research context where the experience of a single student is valid as a reliable contribution to the knowledge being accrued about complaint behaviour. Comments from students interviewed are therefore ultimately used in an illustrative capacity to reflect on the narrative message about complaint behaviour being drawn from text analysis.

In reflecting on research design it is relevant to dwell briefly on research authenticity and James’ (2008) belief that the purpose of evaluating research as genuine and credible is to be able to offer value to stakeholders. James talks in terms of research being ‘worthwhile.’ This can only happen if research is fully representative of what it is studying and authenticating strategies are in place to assure credibility for those being researched and those reading the research outcomes. James (2008) views outcomes as benefiting society generally. This is too aspirational for small-scale case studies that are context bound but James’ expectations that researchers support initiatives emerging from the research to support a positive change for research participants is influential. Student investment in education must be better served

if the complaint experience is elucidated such that this research, or recommendations emerging from it, improve the complaint experience even for one student. Research therefore moves forward recognising the limitations of a small interview sample.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Statistical data**

The purpose of the quantitative analysis of statistical data associated with students' complaints at Riverside University is to:

- i. confirm the number of students' complaints submitted annually;
- ii. establish the profile of students submitting complaints to the University;
- iii. determine the key areas of complaint.

#### **4.1.1 Profiling complainants**

The profiling of complainants and the volume of complaints involves some small-scale quantitative research. Riverside complainants are analysed within the context of the higher education sector at national level; the results are shown at Table 4:

Academic Year	No. of Students' complaints	University Student Nos. (FTE)	Female	Male	Ethnic Minority	Inter-national	U/G	P/G	*Mature Students	+ Nos. national HE Students' complaints to OIA	xNational HE Student Nos. (FTE)
2009 - 2010	17	11,041	2	15	9	4	12	5	7	1341	1,761,030
2008 - 2009	26	10,752	15	11	8 (3 not known)	6	22	4	5	1007	1,736,348
2007 - 2008	28	9,839	16	12	6 (7 not known)	4	27	1	4	900	1,724,946
2006 - 2007	20	9,300	15	5	10	5	17	3	5	734	1,708,607

Table 4: Profile of student complainants 2006-2007 to 2009-2010: Riverside University and the HE Sector

\* Age 25-39 years as defined by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA)

+ As quoted by the OIA in their Annual Report for the relevant year

x Annual Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey

It is important to note a necessary distinction between the presentation of university data and national data meaning that comparative numbers can only be indicative. The complaints at Riverside are analysed by academic year (commencing 1<sup>st</sup> September annually) and relate to the academic year in which the complaint occurs. National statistics captured by the OIA record complaints as they are received across a calendar year, which does not permit a direct comparison with Riverside data on an annual basis. The OIA statistics referenced in Table 4 are for the year that most closely encompasses the equivalent academic year; so for the academic year 2009-2010 running from September 2009 to August 2010, the OIA report referenced is for the year 2010.

Data from the OIA shows that the number of complaints across higher education nationally is rising annually (33% against prior year in 2010 and 83% across the sample range) but represents a small proportion of the student population; in 2009-2010 this is 0.08%. Riverside, showing fluctuations in complaints numbers and experiencing a 35% drop against prior year in 2010, records a slightly higher percentage of complaints at 0.15% in 2009-2010. These statistics confirm that the number of complainants in higher education institutions remains small within the context of the student body and that the Riverside profile mirrors this.

Whilst nationally 69% of complainants are UK domiciled students, the OIA also reports a consistent annual over-representation of both postgraduate students and international students; the largest number of complainants nationally are male and the age group 25-39 years dominates at 37% (OIA, Annual Report, 2010). Riverside University's complainants include a high proportion of mature, postgraduate students although in 2009-2010 this is due

to a number of complaints from the same postgraduate course. However, ethnicity is most prominent. The OIA reports nationality but ethnicity data is not comprehensive; complainants are asked to complete an equal opportunities monitoring form to clarify ethnic background but there is a poor response rate and sector comparison is therefore unreliable. The ethnic mix is significant within the student population at Riverside University, with one in five students from a declared ethnic minority background. The ethnic profile of complainants, including students with an international status, is over-represented, noting in particular that in 2009-2010, 53% of complainants are of an ethnic minority background. Thus, in line with the intent of research design, the ethnicity factor identified via this quantitative approach is noted as a factor for exploration via the subsequent qualitative review of students' complaint texts.

9.1% of all full-time students at Riverside are international students and complaints from international students represent 21% of student complainants across the research sample. Care has to be taken with terminology in higher education where references to 'international' can have differing meanings and be inclusive or exclusive of European Economic Area students. The terminology 'international' in this case study means non-European Economic Area (non-EEA) students. Riverside's experience thus reflects the OIA statistics with a significant representation of international students' complaints submitted annually. The declared ethnic minority complainants at Riverside sit at 36% of the research sample. It is relevant to determine if nationality and ethnicity influence complaint behaviour. It is of note that with the national over-representation of international students, the OIA's 2008 report reflects that 'No doubt the differential fee rates for international students compared to UK domiciled students is relevant here' (OIA, 2008, p.43). Table 5 below summarises the

ethnicity and nationality status of Riverside complainants, distinguishing between international (non-EEA), home (UK) and EEA students:

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>No. Complaints</b>	<b>Ethnic Minority</b>	<b>Inter-national</b>	<b>UK (Home)</b>	<b>EEA</b>
<b>2009 – 2010</b>	17	9	4	13	0
<b>2008 -2009</b>	26	8 (3 not known)	6	18	2
<b>2007 -2008</b>	28	6 (7 not known)	4	23	1
<b>2006 – 2007</b>	20	10	5	15	0

**Table 5: Riverside complainants - nationality and ethnicity status**

Prior research (Harris, 2007) notes the analytical difficulties caused by a lack of consistency in the recording of student characteristics in higher education and a failure to distinguish the nationality of ethnic minority students. This remains a challenge. University data returns to the Higher Education Statistics Agency require ethnicity coding but, as indicated in Table 5, this can remain undeclared by the individual. In terms of behavioural issues, ethnicity can be a factor across all these categories of the student body but there is no reliable statistical data to link ethnicity and nationality.

#### **4.1.2 Areas of complaint**

The ‘trigger’ for individual students’ complaints is drawn from student complaint correspondence and shown at Table 6 below.



<b>COMPLAINT TRIGGER</b>	<b>2006-2007</b>	<b>2007-2008</b>	<b>2008-2009</b>	<b>2009-2010</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
Failing to achieve a 2.1 unit mark or classification	1	7	3	3	14
Getting a poorer classification than anticipated	1	1			2
Failing to take an assessment due to misunderstanding results/non or late receipt of brief	2	6	4		12
Being unable to progress to the next year of the course	1	4	5	2	12
Failing a final year unit (s)	2		1	1	4
Failing the final award and achieving an exit award	1		3	2	6
Failing the year (yr1/yr2) and achieving an exit award	1				1
Unit marks being capped or put to zero due to failed Extenuating Circumstances (EC) submission or failure to submit an EC application	5	2	4	2	13
Failing a Master's level unit (s) (potentially failing award)	3	1	2	2	8
Being awarded an Unclassified/Ordinary degree	1	2	3		6
Being on a 'borderline' average for a higher classification			1	1	2
Unit marked as zero or capped (late/non submission)		3		2	5
Unit marks recorded incorrectly	1	1		1	3
Being withdrawn due to lack of engagement				1	1
Dissatisfaction with the level of fees charged on withdrawal		1			1
Invasion of privacy in Halls with room being accessed by a staff member	1				1

**Table 6: Triggers for students' complaints 2006-2007 to 2009-2010**

The 'trigger' is defined as *the impact issue that moves a student from discontent to formal complaint*. The 'trigger' is important as an indicator of a student's immediate concern and for signalling the reason why a student is no longer tolerating the complaint issues that emerge during the coding process.

The nature of these summary complaint 'triggers' echoes the conclusion of the 2010 annual report by the OIA which states that:

As in previous years, academic-related issues predominate and the vast majority of complaints are concerned with due process in arriving at degree classification, the handling of mitigating circumstances, and challenges to charges of and penalties for academic misconduct including plagiarism and cheating.

(OIA, 2010, p.4)

The dominating factors at Riverside relate to degree classifications (24 complaints), with a focus on failure to achieve an upper second class honours degree (14 complaints) and where marks have been impacted by extenuating circumstances.

Classification disappointments are the 'trigger' for a range of academic disappointments the impact of which may not have been immediately evident to the student. For example, in 2007-2008 seven students complained about their failure to achieve an upper second classification (2.1) at unit or degree level. Underlying reasons ranged from the perceived failure of academic staff (*...the work was not marked in accordance with the unit descriptor Student 78I*) to poor personal decisions regarding extenuating circumstances (*Originally I thought I could still achieve my potential despite my problems.... Student 78O*). During the period of the research sample students at Riverside are focused on impacts on academic

achievement. Yet students do not always articulate the key issue. It is in the qualitative analysis of the text of the student complaint that expressions of student concern and messages about complaint behaviour are prominent. Riverside University has no specified complaints format and students' complaints submissions vary widely in terms of content and clarity. The complainant's immediate concern is to convey the ramifications of the complaint issue on their often complex lifestyles; they will rarely specify the detail of the required outcome. Examples of student submissions, one from each academic year of the research sample, are enclosed at Appendix DA.1– DA.4.

#### **4.1.3 Student interview participants**

To what extent are true emotions expressed in complaint correspondence? Real emotions may be masked or exaggerated for negotiation purposes, particularly in a complaint situation.

(Mattson et al, 2004, p.957))

Interviewing complainants is the means to ascertain if students' written complaints represent genuine dissatisfaction and, most importantly, to explore further students' motivation for submitting a formal complaint at university level. Interviews with complainants offer additional insight in to written complaints and corroborate emerging messages regarding students' complaint behaviour.

All ex-students who submitted a formal complaint at institutional level during the research period are approached about an interview to discuss their experience. The challenges of securing enough participants interviews from an online research sample are recognised; Terhanian and Brem (2012) observe that despite the technological developments that now offer researchers access to a wide audience, it remains difficult to secure enough willing

participants and the experience of this research reflects the difficulties of engaging participants. Seven of the 91 students in the sample engage with the online interview process following a supplementary request. The profile of the interview participants with the complaint ‘trigger’ aligned with the topics identified as being the key issues for complaints in the full sample, is at Table 7 below:

Academic year	Student Ref	Gender	Course Level	Ethnicity	Complaint Trigger
2006-2007	67C	F	6 (final year)	White	Failing to achieve a 2.1 classification
2006-2007	67F	F	6 (final year)	White	Failing to achieve a 2.1 classification
2006-2007	67G	F	5 (second year)	White	Being unable to progress to the next year of the course
2007-2008	78Y	F	5 (second year)	White	Being unable to progress to the next year of the course
2007-2008	78Z	M	6 (final year)	White	Being awarded an Unclassified degree
2008-2009	89A	F	6 (final year)	White	Failing to achieve a 2.1 classification
2009-2010	90H	M	Master's Level	Asian	Failing a Master's level unit (potentially failing award)

**Table 7: Profile of interview participants**

The respondent profile represents all academic years in the research sample and mirrors the dominance of complaints regarding degree classifications. It does not reflect the ethnic diversity discernible in the full body of complainants but interviewees include one international student and two EEA students (non-UK). The gender, age and undergraduate/postgraduate mix is proportionate with the main sample. The interview sample represents 8% of the body of complaints across the period. The volume of complaints is not of prime relevance to the university, rather the potential for a single complaint to generate high profile adverse publicity. The views of individual complainants are in

themselves important and the feedback from the interview participants is used to illuminate messages emerging from student written submissions.

## **4.2 Financial profile**

The OIA's annual report of 2010 presages that a further rise in tuition fees will be responsible for increases in the number of students' complaints; the potential impact of fees dominates practitioner thinking and thus the financial profile of the sample is of relevance.

Students entering higher education in 2006 are subject to 'top up' fees and are liable on a personal loan basis for a maximum of £3,000 per year irrespective of parental income. They study with students on later years of the course who are charged fees under the earlier 'old regime' of a means-tested up front tuition fee of £1,000. Tuition fees are aligned at £3,000 for students on all years of standard undergraduate courses by 2008-2009. During the time span of the research sample the student population is thus subject to differing tuition fee liabilities. The number of complaints rises in the year after the introduction of the higher fees (2007-2008) but these relate to award issues from final year students studying under the old fees regime. Thereafter institutional level complaint numbers at Riverside decrease minimally across the sample years and the majority involve students in their award year of study. This reflects the dominance of complaints around degree classification issues. The statistical data relating to the number of complaints submitted at Riverside does not evidence any increase aligned to the national rise in tuition fees.

### **4.3 Analysis of students' written complaints**

The purpose of the qualitative approach to analysing student texts is to determine the nature of student complaint behaviour following the application of GT coding techniques. This is facilitated through reference to the Conditional Relationship Guide and the theoretical memoranda which reflect on the Conceptual Core Categories (CCC), their summative properties and commonality links with other Core Categories (CC). Statements from students' texts demonstrate the characteristics of the Categories and statements from students' interviews illuminate the messages about the behavioural influences emerging from complaint submissions and ensure behaviour is grounded in the student perspective.

Students' interview responses are cross-checked with the relevant individual complaint text and evidence a precise replication of the issues raised in the university level complaint, including use of the original terminology. This responds to Bryman's (2012) criteria for credibility of written texts and evidence points to texts being genuine rather than the complainant positioning text to garner support.

#### **4.3.1 Student message: 'It's a hostile culture'**

##### **Conceptual Core Category 10: Encountering a hostile culture**

The Conditional Relationship Guide defines this Conceptual Core Category as *studying in an academic environment that is overtly unsupportive*; this is across the full academic year and in all interactions with academic and administrative staff. The definition is specific to the course based learning environment; it does not include the university's support services other than where these have exceptionally been the cause of complaints by two students across the timescale of the sample.

CCC10 *Encountering a hostile culture* encompasses a number of Core Categories that portray the learning environment at Riverside as hostile from the complainants' perspective. The key consequence across CC1 (*Being disadvantaged as an international student*), CC5 (*Experiencing administrative errors*), CC6 (*Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice*), CC7 (*Being subject to unfair treatment*) and CC15 (*Experiencing administrative errors*), is personal devastation for the student by way of academic failure and complaint behaviour is influenced by students feeling extremely frustrated:

*Please I earnestly plead in frustration that you come to my rescue in this matter because I am presently traumatised by this eventuality at the last few days of my programme.*

(Student 90J)

CC1 *Being disadvantaged as an international student* is an exceptional category since the complaint matter originates with issues personal to the student and not the student's interactions within the course based learning environment. International students consider they have heavier burdens than UK students:

*The xxx team does not appear to be sympathetic to the problems faced by foreign students have invested large amounts of money to study in the UK and rely upon the University for support and help during their stay in this country.*

(Student 67M)

The core student support areas of administrative and academic support are criticised through the complaints process as reflected in CC5, *Experiencing administrative errors* and CC1, *Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice*. Administrative errors by faculty staff

influence complaint behaviour where the impact has a significant outcome. Some students miss assessments:

*I had spoken to my faculty on many occasions ...they had looked at my file many times and never informed me that I was due to retake at an earlier date.*

(Student 78M)

Or they have handed in assessments that are subsequently mislaid:

*...I have since found out that I was given the wrong xxx assignment by the xxx office which was sent to me by post. This is not the first time the xxx office has made a mistake. They also misplaced my first assignment which meant I had to redo it and they also made a transcript error in the recording of my results stating that I had not passed the presentation.*

(Student 78Q)

Students' extreme frustration is exacerbated by the impact of the error being disproportionate. Faculty office staff fail to send Student 89B a piece of resit coursework; the student subsequently misses the assessment submission and fails the unit. There are no further resit opportunities and his award is threatened. An appreciation of the full impact of any error, at the end of the academic year, initiates a lack of tolerance of administrative mistakes that students have previously accepted and complaints are initiated:

*Transcription errors and IT malfunctions are unacceptable and this is why I am unable to continue with my studies this year.*

(Student 90O)



This highlights the significance of the ‘trigger’ issue. The complaint text evidences prior experience of issues that have been tolerated by the student up until the point that the personal academic impact becomes clear, at which point the complaint is triggered.

Poor administrative support is compounded by academic behaviour which, as described by student complainants, is overtly bad not simply poor. It is important to note that bad practice is noted to be restricted to particular members of staff and specified unit delivery. Specific academic staff are stated to:

- i. be discourteous, with students being subject to *vitriolic personal diatribes from the tutors* (Student 67C);
- ii. display overt favouritism: *xxx was rarely in the university and I was not one of the select students who had her personal mobile phone number to arrange meetings etc. so throughout the year it proved impossible to speak with her* (Student 67C);
- iii. undertake ‘highly subjective teaching’: *The subjective feedback, and stance taken by xxx, seemed to make a mockery of what I had done, the previous feedback I had been given and the course itself!* (Student 78AA);
- iv. undertake poor course management: *Trying to identify who is responsible for decisions regarding my course has often resulted in confusion, frustration, time wastage and caused me severe stress* (Student 67M);
- v. provide poor feedback: *Throughout the production of this work, I did not receive any negative comments...I therefore need to know where I failed in this. With no indication during the production of this work that it was not of the standard I am capable of, and even more concerning, never being*

*questioned about my apparent underachievement during the final year, I had no opportunity to try and improve on this (Student 78H);*

- vi. *be consistently unavailable: I made every effort to see that lecturer and she was never in her office during office hours (Student 89P);*

The majority of complainants record their struggles to access academic staff:

*I tried to get hold of lecturers and markers for help and this was not possible.*

(Student 67H)

*On numerous occasions I tried to speak with ... but she was never available or in her office, I left messages on the notepad hung on her office door for such matters but received no response.*

(Student 67C)

*I had problems with my unit lecturer regarding the assignment I had to retake. I made every effort to see that lecturer and she was never in her office during office hours*

(Student 89P)

Difficulty obtaining access to academic tutors is a common theme and is endorsed by interview participants. Five interviewees mention an expectation of personal support that is not forthcoming from academic staff. An international student who fails his Master's degree focuses his complaint on the lack of help received and the contrast with another institution where he finally achieved his award and ... *found the staff to be extremely helpful and understanding in all fields of academic support (Student 78Z)*. Students interviewed confirm messages in complaint texts about the lack of support in the learning environment from which complaints are emerging:

### **The Interview: Student 67C**

*I went to my course leader to explain my circumstances in the hope of some support and understanding, but got nothing. I got to the point where I was just working my socks off with no support from tutors as I got fed up of the endless negativity from them, after nearly 3 years of trying to get something positive from xxxxx tutors I think I just lost all will to fight.*

Dissatisfaction around academic staff is a feature of the early rare research into students' complaints (Dolinsky, 1994) and continues in the current proliferation of student focused analysis being pursued by the QAA as part of their strategic intent to encompass students within quality processes. The QAA sponsored Kandiko and Mawer (2013) report on student expectations of higher education confirms that difficulty accessing academic staff is prevalent. Formal complaint behaviour at Riverside is initiated when the student perceives they are personally disadvantaged by the poor academic provision and this can result in a breakdown in the relations with individual members of staff: *I don't trust this teacher that he can mark my paper fairly* (Student 89K).

Expectations of academic staff are important and complaints emerge where expectations are not met. Students are surprised for, example, when academic staff are not aware of regulations or procedural requirements:

*However no-one really understood the regulations and some were saying I could do the assignment if I wanted to whilst others were saying I couldn't.*

(Student 78F)

Complainants in the sample have a great sense of injustice. CC7 *Being subject to unfair treatment* records students feeling they have been treated badly. This is focused on assessment decisions. The Conditional Relationship Guide defines CC7 as *Being prevented from achieving an expected outcome due to discriminatory assessment practice by the university*. Here, within the hostile culture, academics are seen to be using their judgement in an unfair and selective way:

*I also believe that all the units are marked in favour to who the tutors like. I don't think any of the units should be marked by any of our tutors that teach us. It should be marked by someone else who doesn't know us as a group to make it fair on the marking. All work handed in shows all our names.*

(Student 78X)

CC7 also reflects complaints where there can be an impact on a final award, the perceived unfairness of which drives the student to be utterly focused on reversing the decision:

*I'm very determined to have my grade altered, and really wouldn't push for it if I didn't feel I had been misled and unfairly graded.*

(Student 89AA)

Mirroring aspects of CC17 *Promoting personal effort* this sense of unfairness centres on academic judgement and complainants' lack of recognition of this concept. Student complaints' texts capture complainants' surprise at an adverse assessment outcome.

Students are shocked by the result to the extent that students' expectations must be brought in to question. This is reflective of White's (2007) Australian study that observes a mismatch between academic and student understanding of the standard necessary for grading. Students expect success and complain about the nature of academic judgement when they do not secure it.

The theme of unfair treatment is also echoed in CC5 *Expressing dissatisfaction with the complaint process*. Students expect their complaints to be accepted and express dissatisfaction with the complaint process when this does not happen:

*I do get the distinct feeling that the university does not want to learn about 'issues' from students which is a shame because at the same time I am sure the University wishes to improve. It is almost as if the University does not want to acknowledge that it can be at fault. Processes/procedures – lengthy complicated documents that are put in place by the University to ensure quality standards are fine, but please appreciate that the average student would not read them and they are quite complicated.*

(Student 90U)

This is the only comment in 91 texts regarding complexity in the university's policy and procedural statements. There is a mixed picture from interviewee respondents asked to comment on the complaints policy, with one student reporting *It was fairly easy to follow* (Student 89A), another describing it as *Totally baffling and complicated...* (Student 67G)

Another recommends that the university should be proactive in advertising the policy:

### **The Interview: Student 67C**

*I feel the complaint procedure is not explained and not easy to follow up, I feel it should be thoroughly gone through during induction. I had to go online and trawl around to find how to submit a claim and to whom... I did not feel able to talk to my faculty as I felt they would not listen to me.*

Student 67C highlights the real issue with the complaints policy which is the focus of all students' views; this is the negative environment facing a complainant once they engage with the complaint process.

The experience of CCC10 *Encountering a hostile culture* directs student behaviour and reflects Crié's (2003) observance on consumer complaint behaviour that '...the final manifestation does not directly depend on initiating factors but on evaluation of the situation by the consumer and of evolution over time' (p.62). A student's reaction is dictated less by the complaint itself than the experience of trying to escalate the complaint issue. It is not impacted by the complexity of the issue but rather the lack of empathy in the process that is culture driven.

When a student first experiences an issue of dissatisfaction they raise an informal verbal query with an academic course tutor and may be met with a lack of help. The student thus experiences double deviation (Loo et al, 2013); they have the impact of the complaint issue itself and then the impact of a poor response:

#### **The Interview: Student 90H**

*I felt it was useless to put complaint, and I believe student cant get any help through this procedure in future. Student should be encouraged instead of discourage.*

To address the lack of response, the student at Riverside submits a first stage written formal complaint at faculty level. This may also be met with an unsympathetic written response, or even aggressive resistance, as confirmed by one interviewee participant; at this point the student at Riverside experiences a triple deviation impact (Edvardsson et al, 2011).

#### **The Interview: Student 67F**

*I was referred to an independent student support adviser within my faculty. She made it very clear that she was on the university's side and tried to dissuade me from taking it further. In fact I would go as far as saying she tried to bully me into not taking it further by telling me that it would affect my future career as no one would hire someone who constantly complained.*

Cooper-Hind and Taylor's (2012) interviews with student complainants concludes similarly that the complexity of institutional complaints policies deters students from complaining.



Their report adds that ‘A number of students reported that they considered submitting a formal complaint out of frustration, and this seemed linked to a perceived lack of support from academic tutors’ (P.7). In progressing complaints at Riverside students continue to operate in a hostile environment. The structuring of the student experience as one of alienation has already been explored in literature; Mann (2001) evokes the sense of confusion and frustration expressed by students in their written submissions:

Most students entering the new world of the academy are in an equivalent position to those crossing the borders of a new country – they have to deal with the bureaucracy of checkpoints, or matriculation, they may have limited knowledge of the local language and customs, and are alone.

(Mann, 2001, p.11)

As a ‘lonely migrant’ a student seeks help and guidance.

#### **4.3.2 Student message: ‘Tell me what to do!’**

##### **Conceptual Core Category 16: Tell me what to do!**

CCC16 *Tell me what to do!* evidences an expectation by students that university staff will be proactive in telling them what to do and when; it also lays bare the complexity of lifestyle challenges faced by some students. Within the context of these challenges the individual student is looking for support and advice.

This category also evidences and reinforces the dual layer within the student complaint experience at Riverside. Students are immediately reactive to the realisation of failure and the potential impact on their award as represented by a poor mark or academic failure; this



is the 'trigger' event. Yet the focus of the written complaint is the event or series of events giving rise to the 'trigger' which the student has not previously appreciated as being significant. The student has expected they would be directed rather than left in a position of ignorance until the 'trigger' impact:

*I accept that the faculty made efforts electronically and visually to inform me that I should complete the work. However I submit that a verbal sentence of maybe 3 words from my tutor could have saved my university career....Surely a tutor could have said 'X ..look at the board!' That's all it would have taken.....For the want of a few words I may now have to end my university career and not be able to fulfil my ambition.*

(Student 78C)

Another student writes:

*The shock in June of being told that I had not submitted anything for Assignment 3 was total and unexpected. xxxx did not contact by email and did not speak with me about my submission or lack of it. Therefore I was unaware that there had been a problem until June - some seven months later.*

(Student 90D)

The virtual student cry *Tell me what to do!* echoes through all the Core Categories of this Conceptual Core Category. Students' complaints captured in CC12 *Experiencing poor communications* are closely linked; the category definition of *Not receiving key information from the university in a proactive way* stresses the individual complainant's perception of Riverside's obligation to ensure students have accurate information at the right time. Where

the university fails to do this and students are disadvantaged then complainants' frustration pours off the page.

One disabled student remarks that part of the general approach to communication – conventionally via a notice board – does not serve any student well:

*Any information regarding the course that needed to be obtained quickly (i.e. the rescheduling or the relocation of lectures and seminars) could only be found amongst the disorganised mass of papers on the notice board.*

(Student 89D)

To the student, communication failures are responsible for blighting their academic future.

Students can be apparently ignorant of the requirement to undertake compulsory pieces of work and can be seriously disadvantaged as a result:

*Throughout the whole of the year, I never received any correspondence in relation to this project, or any notification when such work had to be handed in.*

(Student 78A)

Another student, receiving a zero mark due to a submission problem, has expectations that the university should attempt to contact students:

*At this crucial stage of my degree if the tutor knew something was wrong why not write a note to home and/or phone my mobile? I have always received correspondence at my home address and I always have my mobile with me....I would like to plead with you that, especially in a final year, more effort is made to*

*contact students if there are any concerns which could affect their degree classification.*

(Student 78V)

Thus complaints are driven by a communication vacuum from the students' perspective and disappointment in academic support:

*The course objectives state that the university is there to help students develop their potential. Unfortunately this would not appear to be the case with me.*

(Student 90D)

Students can be dependent and this is exemplified by complaints within CC3 *Experiencing an extenuating circumstance*. Riverside's approach to extenuating circumstances requires students to take decisions independently; students must decide if they are 'fit to study' and, if not, they can seek recognition of mitigation by providing evidence for review by an extenuating circumstances panel. Students are concerned by the personal responsibility involved in providing the relevant evidence and are highly reactive when failure to provide appropriate evidence results in an adverse decision:

*Extenuating circumstances are there to protect students with problems. I have severe problems yet you have currently offered no solutions, only defences of your policies and academic integrity. I am looking for assistance. I am asking for help not an argument on the finer points of your policies.*

(Student 78O)

Once again, the institutional wish for the student to take responsibility for their circumstances is not appreciated by students; they expect the university to *Tell me what to*

*do!* in order to recover from the academic impact of being absent from studies due to circumstances beyond their control.

CCC16 *Tell me what to do!* as a Conceptual Core Category also encompasses CC8 *Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail*. Whilst closely aligned to extenuating circumstances, this is characterised by the devastating nature of the issues raised for the first time in extensive personal detail. Students within this category suffer multiple distressful events for which they have not previously sought recognition: one student details the breakdown of ethnic family values, inter-family fighting, family abuse, financial bankruptcy, police arrests and resisting forced marriage. Student 78S opens her complaint by stating her ethnicity and the associated cultural difficulties she has endured and then details her family issues during the first two years of her course in five pages of typed A4:

*I am writing you this appeal from my own words, as if I am speaking and telling you my life story for the past years. I have wanted to tell someone about my situation but until now I have never had the strength or the courage to do it....as it has now come to the final point, where it is a struggle to either give up on my study dreams or become an uneducated young housewife, I chose to fight....*

(Student 78S)

She concludes with a reminder that she is in a 'helpless situation' and is seeking university guidance. Her helpless situation is characteristic of other complainants in this category in representing both a challenging lifestyle and the impact of academic failure. It is also reflected in CC15 *Experiencing mental health issues*, where students seek recognition of longstanding and acute periods of mental distress that situate them in exceptional scenarios

that cannot accommodate study. Students are clear that these issues are not generated by the university but they expect assistance. Student 67G with certificated longstanding mental health problems finds herself placed on a distance learning delivery with no account taken of her inability to learn on such an independent basis. Her complaint fails. Student 89M details the death of a family member, the loss of a family business and sale of the family home resulting in stated depression and subsequent confusion regarding work submitted. This raises two issues for behaviour: it contributes to the range of challenging personal circumstances that characterise some students' lifestyles at Riverside and supports prior research which has found that psychological distress, in particular depression, is prevalent amongst university students (Morrison and O'Connor, 2005). These intense personal problems continue to influence the need to complain and reflect an expectation of support. This category emphasises that students remain driven to achieve their award rather than suspend their studies in the face of often significant difficulties. It speaks to the value of an award to the student.

Complaint behaviour is instigated by a view that a poor academic performance is the result of undeclared personal circumstances that the student subsequently appreciates they should have disclosed. In some cases this is stated to be due to cultural pressures to retain information within the family: *That I write as much as I did in my appeal is only with the permission of my father* (Student 89E). Others claim they are not in a position to judge their fitness to study and some express concern about academic failure if their extenuating circumstances submission is not accepted:

*It all comes down to risk. There is too much attributed risk to not sitting an assessment for poor reasoning: thus people would rather sit the assessment. This*

*is how your policy works in order to make only serious circumstances get to the application stage. I was too scared of being rejected by your system....*

(Student 78C)

Student concern about ‘being rejected’ is also mirrored in CC2 *Submitting a deferential complaint*. This reflects the submissive approach taken by some student complainants. Despite dissatisfaction that has driven them to pursue a complaint, their texts are still peppered with deferential phraseology:

*I am writing to humbly appeal the award...I am humbly requesting you to grant me another opportunity to write this subject....kindly consider my appeal and give the opportunity to get the MBA award from one of the renowned universities in the UK.*

(Student 89G)

*...I don't want to blame my teacher ever, as I have been told since from childhood that children have greater respects than (sic) parents, I always addressed her 'respected teacher' but now there is matter of my career and whole life, and I am being discriminated badly therefore I am begging for justice only.*

(Student 90H)

There is a cultural issue here and the definition of the category notes that it is endemic to international students where research has previously recognised that writing style is reflective of cultural inheritance (Nkemleke, 2004). The 28 Initial Codes making up this Category represent 27 students; 14 are international students (nine Asian) and 13 are of UK nationality with seven of a specified ethnic minority (four Asian). Thus appeals include references to cultural matters as an aside: *...it's a very religious time for us at the moment...*

(Student 67K). When international students subsequently progress a complaint they attempt to mediate their approach. One complainant who forwards his appeal externally to the OIA advises the university politely:

*With due respect I want to let you know that I have submitted an appeal.....*

(Student 90AA)

One international student who is very displeased about receiving a fail mark softens his complaint by adding:

*Regarding to my educational period in (Riverside) University, I have to say that, I had no problems with my classmates or any tutors. Besides, I enjoyed my course and improved my skills since the beginning of the course.*

(Student 89W)

but he also states:

*...as a foreign student, I do not deserve to get a fail mark and certainly think about carrying out this issue to student organisations, institutions, press and media...and inform them about my situation.*

(Student 89W)

It must be noted, however, that the research sample contains two examples of an aggressive approach taken by international students, both making what proved to be unfounded allegations of discrimination against members of staff:

*At the moment I think my room is being singled out for unfair attention and spying activities by your member of staff.... I think we can comfortably take care of*

*ourselves without any ill-advised interference whatsoever from any member of staff who take delight in flagrantly violating one's right with impunity with the sole bias being difference in skin colour.* (Student 67I)

Aside from these two exceptions, which potentially mirror the 'vengeful dissent' identified by Goodboy and Frisby (2014), international students' complaints' texts exhibit an awareness of a power differential between university and student, and a cultural respect for the professional academic that is evident in prior research with South Asian students in an English university (Hart and Coates, 2010). Reflecting this research, the common feature at Riverside is that, irrespective of individual perceptions of the standing of academic staff, student complainants overcome any cultural inheritances to initiate a very public and formal complaint against the university. Yet at the same time CC2 continues to represent students' hopes that the university will resolve issues and *Tell me what to do!*

*Please give me another chance I know I deserve it because I am an intelligent person who really wants to learn and improve my life.*

(Student 67A)

*I would really appreciate your help.*

(Student 67K and Student 67L)



#### 4.3.3 Student message: 'Don't forget 'The Deal'!'

##### CCC 11: Expecting a qualification by right - 'The Deal'

'The Deal' is conceptualised by a single student's statement:

*..I would be left with a postgraduate Diploma, that wasn't the deal, the deal is a Degree.* (Student 67E)

In this instance the complainant, as an international student, views the lifestyle upheaval and sacrifices made to meet the higher international fees as being an entitlement to their chosen award. Another international student who is failing complains:

*So I am writing this email to help me for attainment of my degree which is my right.* (Student 90H)

A range of associated Core Categories capture students' complaints emerging when the university fails to provide the academic success students believe they are entitled to. Within their complaints students promote their role in *Confirming adherence to university procedures* (CC4), *Promoting personal effort* (CC17) and *Deserving better outcomes* (CC14); where outcomes are not as expected this results in students *Challenging the university* (CC13) and on occasion *Involving a third party* (CC9).

The concept of 'The Deal' explores the Core Categories as a depiction of students' expectations of higher education, their notions of what they expect as part of their perceived contract with Riverside University and how the university's failure to meet 'The Deal' influences students' complaint behaviour. 'The Deal' manifests itself as a psychological contract on the part of the student. Research into consumer complaint behaviour (Soscia, 2007) focuses on responses following a purchase and recognises that behaviour can be

influenced by unwritten pre-purchase understandings by the consumer. This forms a contract in the mind of the consumer that leads to dissatisfaction if that contract is not met. A student's psychological contract takes the form of high expectations of achievement.

When 'The Deal' is threatened, students' complaints, as characterised within CC13 *Challenging the university*, can represent a robust approach to university practice:

*Frankly I feel (Dean of faculty) has just swept the issue with my mark under the carpet claiming mainly based on an academic judgement, which it isn't.....it's just outrageous frankly.* (Student 90L)

This is associated with narrowly missing a higher classification. The most aggressive and emotional complaints are focused on borderline decisions, where the student is just below (1% - 2%) the percentage for a higher classification in a banding system that permits the award of the higher classification if the student's academic profile meets certain criteria. When students have expectations of achievement in respect of their classifications and these are not realised their response is emotional:

*I do not accept this decision – I believe he is mistaken.....I maintain that the only fair assessment in these circumstances is to give the benefit of the doubt to me, the student, and to award a Second Class Honours (lower division.)* (Student 89V)

Student 78I, who provides a reasoned argument for her appeal concerning a lower than anticipated mark, mentions her ... *bitter disappointment* with the mark since it impacts her award. International students have the same concerns. An international Master's student

questions the marking process for one of his assignments and in particular, the actions of one academic member of staff. He argues that as a result of the university failing to apply its own procedures he is being disadvantaged by one individual. He notes his suspicion of the outcome of the faculty level complaint. The student's award is at risk if he fails the unit in question and there is a strong message about the inappropriateness of academic actions:

*I am also confident that, even the lecturer that made my dream comes to an end;  
nothing has been done to him.* (Student 89K)

There is no distinction in approach between nationalities in responding to threats to their award. Gynnild (2011) observes that '...students know quite well that assessment is not an exact science and institutions may spend considerable time responding to interrogations about grades and handling formal grievance cases' (p.41). This is considered to result from students' perception of fairness when they have been given a grade well below average. Gynnild's (2011) research concludes that grading appeals are prompted by a student's perception of their standing against the average marking level for the rest of their peers. Student complainants at Riverside argue that it *...is not a fair judgement* (Student 90S) when they are prevented from doing something by the university's assessment regulations but fairness is not equated within the context of peers, rather within the student's own view of their effort and performance.

Student complainants have confidence in their ability and potential. In CC14 *Deserving better outcomes* complaints are initiated when students do not achieve the outcome they feel they deserve; this is exacerbated when their degree classification average places them at the borderline for a higher award and they fail to achieve it. Student 67S, dissatisfied with her

classification, complains about receiving a *too low* mark for one unit and seeks a remark to ensure that the submitted work was ...*marked together properly*. Here the student's expectations are raised by academic intimation of being in line for a higher classification. Student 78AA complains about a number of assessments, again expecting a higher mark than awarded as a result of his interpretation of tutor feedback:

*I feel that I was misled and unfairly lulled into a kind of false sense of security that I had aced my project, which a low 2.1 does not reflect.*

(Student 78AA)

He reinforces that the volume of work he has undertaken deserves a higher mark than awarded:

*I felt that my extensive work within this area ...proved that I had indeed fulfilled the brief to an excellent standard.*

(Student 78AA)

Borderline classification issues consistently act as a 'trigger' for complaints about deserving a better outcome. This is closely allied to CC7 *Being subject to unfair treatment* where perceptions of fairness are relative to assessment outcomes. When academic expectations are not met the student believes there is unfairness:

*I am totally unsatisfied with the result of my appeal I've worked very hard in the 3 years studied. I have a clear conscience about all the effort I put into my degree. I really don't think I deserve an unclassified degree.*

(Student 90T)

CC14 *Deserving better outcomes* is a reflection of student complainants' belief in their ability and also confirmation of students' expectation that their alignment with university requirements should result in a positive outcome.

CC4 *Confirming adherence to university procedures* captures the effort made by complainants to show how they are careful to meet university requirements or the associated procedures of the university. This is an aspect of 'The Deal' from the student view. Student 89O with extensive medical issues writes that on two occasions she did exactly as advised in presenting medical evidence but was still unable to secure her appeal for a higher classification. Student 89Q, whose final year is impacted by a series of personal traumas, opens his appeal by assurance that he started the year very positively with all participation and engagement in all units. His written complaint reflects formal university terminology and an attempt by the student to indicate his adherence to university expectations. Having followed the advice of academic staff, students appear bewildered and complain where assessment marks do not meet their expectations:

*I returned to my tutor on several occasions to discuss the progress of my essay. I was not encouraged to redirect my plans.*

(Student 78Y)

The student is careful to explain that they have done as asked but without the desired success. Students interviewed some five years after their complaint relay the same message:

### **The Interview: Student 78Y**

*My complaint was about a mark I had received from one of my academic assignments. The pass mark was 40% and I had received 38%...Furthermore I had a number of one to one's with my personal tutor and sought advice on the assignments methodology and I felt disappointed with my overall mark. I was hoping the outcome would be that an independent person could re-look at all the evidence I had been given including the advice I had been given over tutorials and also my academic work. I had hoped my mark could have been lifted to 2%.*

It is important to underline the distinction here. The student is not complaining about the appropriateness of academic staff advice, or that they have been failed by their supervisor in any way, the complaint is focused on the efforts they have made to adhere to academic advice and thus the subsequent unfairness of not achieving an anticipated mark.

Within CC17 *Promoting personal effort* student complainants are keen to publicise their individual effort because of their perception of the value of that effort and that it has not been recognised appropriately. A student who has failed a unit, despite having already repeated the year, therefore sees a lower award as unfair:

*...I have tried hard in every subject and have completed and handed every piece of work and was getting good marks for all my work...and was therefore confident that I would definitely pass even if I didn't do so well in the exam.*

(Student 89S)

It is of note in complaints of this nature that the assessed standard of any work undertaken is not explored by the student.

There are also challenges to academic judgement with one student referring their work to four purported external specialists to support an appeal against Riverside's assessment of the standard of their work:

*Their comments were although I could do more regarding methodology....the general remark as that the Dissertation was excellent regarding BSc standards and for certain not of a (fail) grade.*

(Student 78Z)

The student's concern is the scale of their contribution rather than the quality and this complaint carries the transactional undertones evident across all texts. Student complainants express belief that personal input secures success; the concept of student input being subject to academic assessment, which may also result in a fail, is not evidenced as part of the student perception of 'The Deal'.

This chimes with White's (2007) Australian study where interviews evidence the student view that marks awarded should reflect effort as much as the intellectual rigour required:

*The achievement of high grades was seen by students to be in part the direct result of the effort they themselves made....Many felt that 'effort' should be rewarded in addition to the quality of the work submitted.*

(White, 2007, p.600)

The differential between expectation and outcome is responsible for dissatisfaction. Aligning with the Australian experience students at Riverside reinforce how hard they have worked and they expect return for effort expended. Finney and Finney (2010), reflecting on student inclinations to entitlement proffer that students with lower entry qualifications may

.....be more likely to feel entitled and less likely to be involved in learning; they may be more likely to view their relationship with the university as an exchange because they are less equipped to involve themselves in creating knowledge.

(Finney and Finney, 2010, p.288).

This cannot be verified at Riverside since students' academic profiles on entry are not mapped against socio-economic background.

CC17 *Promoting personal effort* is very closely aligned with CC14 *Deserving better outcomes*. The mutual theme of these categories is student belief that personal effort itself, not the standard of that effort, is deserving of a positive outcome. Where students fail to achieve what they feel they deserve, they may bring in support to help secure 'The Deal'.

Within CC9 *Involving a third party* there are a number of statements about external intervention that vary from medical, to counsellor, to police reports that students cite to support their complaint and which evidence the wide range of personal issues that complicate students' lives. More importantly, it sees students starting to call on the support of external



parties. Seven students make statements about parental involvement; this is high profile from an administrative practitioner's perspective since parental involvement can witness a more aggressive stance. One student finishes his appeal with a statement that his parents will take up where he has left off; he alludes to the investment in education that may be a parental burden:

*...you may well be contacted by either my mother or father in the future as they are not best pleased at what has happened and may wish to progress further outside of the university procedures. Attending university is a large investment by any standards a comment mentioned frequently at the graduation ceremony.*

(Student 90U)

Student 90F is supported by a mother who threatens the intervention of various academic bodies and invokes issues of power imbalance:

*'xxx was like a fugitive around the university on Friday...explained to me that he is afraid generally of the situation that he could be penalised if he tries to sort things out for himself and that could result in him not achieving his law degree.*

(Student 90F)

This phenomenon of the 'helicopter parent' (Somers and Settle, 2010; White, 2005) adds complexity to complaint handling. Schoefer and Diamantopolous (2008) argue that third party intervention is an emotionally considered response by a complainant resulting from an assessment of how the initial complaint has been handled and emerging from a sense of injustice. The rationale for parental involvement is not clear but students' texts evidence an

absence of comment on the support systems that Riverside's complaint policies promote. Only two students mention being supported by the Students Union. Reflecting on their complaint experiences over five years earlier, ex-students today give strong messages about the absence of help when facing a complaint scenario:

**The Interview: Student 67G**

*I feel I was laughed off and ignored when I brought my concerns to the attention of many of the university staff both lecturer and faculty and that neither of them knew what was actually going on in the institution they worked in.*

**The Interview: Student 78Y**

*I felt very much on my own and felt I did not have anyone from the university supporting me on this, I felt powerless to the universities complex policies and procedures. Due to not having experiences with writing complaints/appeals previous to this I felt disempowered before I had even written the complaint.*

Student complainants are seeking help in dealing with a matter of high personal significance. 'The Deal' reflects complainants' focus on assessment failure and degree classifications.

This is a key influence on complaint behaviour and a deeper understanding of this should elucidate behaviour further. Why are students so pre-occupied with classification issues?

Written complaints are testimony to students' sense of unfairness around assessment outcomes and disappointment engenders a highly emotional response. The significance of the degree classification bandings is explored further with interview participants. Student 67F observes that the focus on classifications is purely student driven and often linked to plans for higher degrees:

**The Interview: Student 67F**

*I did need a 2.1 to get onto my post-grad course. From a university point of view grades were never really encouraged by staff at all. They seem to have the view that as long as your (sic) passed then that was enough. It could be why they clearly saw not issue as to why I wanted to take the exams I missed rather than just be given a pass.*

Student 67C advises that it is only in the latter stages of their course that students dwell on classification issues and this is linked to the perceived relevance of classifications to future employers:

### **The Interview: Student 67C**

*In the real world outside university the grades realistically equate to a 1<sup>st</sup> (the world is your oyster, especially if that degree is from one of the top ten universities), a 2:1 (this equates to coming in 2<sup>nd</sup>, not as good as a first but still affords doors opening), a 2:2 (well this is seen as coming in 3<sup>rd</sup> and when you have a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> to choose from there's no contest, it's put on your degree certificate as "Second Class, Second Degree" and the "Second Class" is how it's perceived), then there is a 3<sup>rd</sup> (well with this grade you're better off not even mentioning you have a degree as it's assumed you only just scraped by and would be a liability not an asset).*

The disclosure linking classification with employment from the student perspective is treated with caution. Coding does not identify employment matters as a Core Category. Key Point 25 *Damaging employment prospects captures* single comments around future careers from only nine students across two academic years in the sample. Four students' comments on employment are also captured within Key Point 12 *Having future plans jeopardised*. This does not indicate employment issues as an influence on complaint behaviour. However student texts are focused purely on the key complaint issue troubling them; complainants

rarely articulate a desired outcome or why it is important. Where students state a longer term goal, then this is the exception and it therefore takes on a significance. Future events mentioned by students do reflect employment concerns:

*...it is paramount I obtain this degree. The sole objective to me applying for and undertaking this degree is to enable myself to have a chance at bettering my life and becoming successful in business.* (Student 90O)

A student seeking a higher classification states:

*Whether or not this affects my future career no one knows at this point in time – but I do know already that major graduate employers are asking for a minimum 2:2 in order for a job application to be considered.*

(Student 90U)

Student 67S, attempting to get her marks changed due to extenuating circumstances, adds that *I hope this can be changed as it will affect my future employment and further education prospects if not.* Assessment failure and its impact on degree classifications is the driver of complaints but dissatisfaction is compounded by students' perception of the value of a 'good' degree to employment potential. Student 90L writes: *My career path and opportunities to further my career could be totally marred....at times in the future I may not be taken any further in a company because I don't have a 2.1.* Another complainant, academically disadvantaged by illness, is clear about the personal significance of achieving a particular degree:

*At present, my LPC and Training Contract offer is subject to me getting a 2.1 which at present is going to be impossible despite my work being at that level.*

(Student 67F)

Student 78I, who has had her complaint rejected at faculty level, adds the matter of future employment to her university complaint:

*I came to University to gain a Degree that would enhance the high grades I had already received at GCSE and A Level from my previous two educational establishments. I have been awarded a level that, for me, is disappointing and inhibits my employment opportunities in the current job market, as I am sure you are aware that many employers specify a minimum level of 2.1 to apply for the positions.*

(Student 78I)

The complaint focus on assessment and classification reflects the importance of the longer term currency of the degree to the individual complainant. CCC11 *Expecting a qualification by right - 'The Deal'* encompasses students' expectations of their award which embodies their future aspirations.

#### **4.3.4 Submissions to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)**

All student complainants are advised that they can forward their complaint to the OIA within a three month timescale of the completion of internal procedures with the university. Table 8 below indicates the number of complaint submissions that are resolved at university level and the number of complains escalated to the OIA:



<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>No. complaints</b>	<b>No. complaints resolved</b>	<b>No. complaints to OIA</b>
<b>2009 – 2010</b>	17	5	1
<b>2008 -2009</b>	26	7	4
<b>2007 -2008</b>	28	3	5
<b>2006 – 2007</b>	20	2	1

**Table 8: Complaint submissions to the OIA**

A total of 11 students across all years of the research sample forward their continuing dissatisfaction to the OIA. This is a relatively high proportion (12%) within the context of the small numbers of university level complainants in the student body. There is an increase in the resolution of complaints across the sample that reflects increased risk management by Riverside staff in seeking to resolve complaints where university processes have not been followed completely. Yet as only 17 (19%) of students' complaints in the research study are resolved, there is interest in knowing why some students progress their complaints externally and others do not.

The complaints of those students forwarding their complaints to the OIA are reviewed for any coding or associated comment that might distinguish their texts from the complainants who complete the complaint process on receipt of the university's response. The students are of mixed gender and nationality and are all in the final year of their award. Four students fail to obtain their award, six students fail to secure the expected higher classification and one second year student fails a unit due to submitting corrupt discs. Of these, three students express concerns about damaged employment prospects:

*The resulting 2:2 Degree award that has been confirmed has left me in a disadvantaged position in the graduate employment market. Many employers exclude applications from graduates with degrees below 2.1, which reduces the positions I am eligible to apply for.* (Student 78I)

*Since receiving the lower grade I have felt pressured to get a higher qualification due to the demand for a 2.1 in all good graduate jobs.*

(Student 78O)

*I am very much concerned for my future and career and I really don't want anyone to play with them.* (Student 89AA)

There is little to distinguish the approach taken by these student complainants in their university complaint submissions from those of peer colleagues. With two exceptions, the students' complaint submissions to the OIA reflect the content of the text in their university submissions, often using the same phraseology. Two students use the opportunity to reflect on a number of issues beyond the original complaint and write aggressive, highly critical submissions. Yet coding gives no indication of any exceptional frustration that might indicate these complainants are more likely to take matters externally than any other student with an unsatisfactory response from the university. No students submitting to the OIA respond to the request for interview and it is not possible to explore further any issues of significance that might offer explanation of the behaviour relating to the most persistent of complainants.



#### **4.4 National culture and ethnicity**

Coding analysis confirms the impact of a student's national culture and/or ethnic inheritance as relevant to complaint behaviour; 17 students (19%) across the research sample of ninety-one students refer to cultural and ethnicity matters in their complaint. These are expressed in the Core Categories encompassing *Being disadvantaged as an international student*, *Experiencing an extenuating circumstance*, *Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail* and *Submitting a deferential complaint*. Analysis reflects on any distinguishing factors here for differing student status.

##### **4.4.1 EEA (non-UK) students**

No issues raised by the very small number of EEA (non-UK) students (Greece and Estonia) are coded to nationality or ethnicity matters; complaints are focused on academic failure and rejected extenuating circumstances resulting in the withdrawal of an internship by one student who forwards his complaint to the OIA.

##### **4.4.2 International students (non-EEA)**

With the proportion of international students in the complaint sample it is noteworthy that CC1 *Being disadvantaged as an international student* contains few Initial Codes, with half of the complaints dominated by the two international complainants with aggressive complaints citing racial discrimination. When the cultural aspects of being a foreign student are mentioned, codes observe that international students do not regard the university as supportive with the additional cultural burdens they feel they experience. These include the challenges of returning home for family matters or language struggles; complaint behaviour is influenced by an expectation that allowances should be made due to the personal sacrifice to meet cultural requirements:

*I came along (sic) way to study and may well have not done well but I tried hard, I put a lot of my time for my work (please put yourself in my position, for a non-English 1<sup>st</sup> language speaker.*

(Student 67A)

They also expect support from academic tutors:

*The... team does not appear to be sympathetic to the problems faced by foreign students who have invested large amounts of money to study in the UK and rely upon the university for support and help during their stay in this country.*

(Student 67M)

Students' statements endorse Gruber et al's (2011) conclusions that, in common with their UK peers, international students place high emphasis on the attitude of academic staff and that an empathetic approach is important in influencing a positive complaint experience. It is noteworthy that cultural resistance to complaining by international students at Riverside is overcome at a low tipping point. The student may not be failing an award, they may be failing a single unit with a right to re-take the assessment but it is the personal adverse academic impact that initiates complaint behaviour. This chimes with prior recent research (Hart and Coates, 2010) amongst South East Asian students which concludes that, whilst cultural values make international students uncomfortable in any complaint scenario, they will ultimately react where their academic position is threatened. Students '...respect the knowledge of academic staff but at the same time would be willing to complain should they

feel that their student experience is not meeting expectations' (Hart and Coates, 2010, p. 311).

The impact of a threat to his award is such that one student threatens suicide if he does not secure his Master's degree on appeal. Student 90M notes that he had sold financial assets to pay his tuition fees and was *...not admitted to achieve a Postgraduate Diploma*. The student's approach is deferential: *Sir, I humbly wish to bring to your notice....I will deeply appreciate your kindest assistance* but his complaint is focused to his degree which is 'The Deal' from his perspective.

As reflected in the literature review (Su and Bao, 2001; Sharma et al, 2010; Chen et al, 2011) the role of nationality in complaint behaviour is documented as a feature of consumer complaint behaviour generally and specifically in relation to the international higher education student base. The prime comparison is with Western complainants who are viewed as more assertive and self-centred and Asian complainants considered sensitive to social power norms. *CC2 Submitting a deferential complaint* indicates that international students can offer a deferential approach that denotes a cultural respect for academic staff. Yet this has been refuted by Nkemleke (2004) whose research challenges the assumption that international students are disinclined to complain or are tactical about the use of deferential terminology. International students' complaints at Riverside evidence concern about academic achievement and a need for academic support that is reflected in all students' complaints.

#### 4.4.3 Ethnicity factors

Coding analysis identifies that student complaint behaviour is initiated by matters arising from an inherited ethnic culture. This is relevant not only to the reaction of international students but also to UK ethnic minority students, reflecting the general diversity of the student body.

International students' complaints draw on ethnic challenges faced by family expectations:

*My family was in chaos after my mother left and as the eldest son I had to be there to support my little sisters in these difficult time.*

(Student 89X)

Similarly UK ethnic minority students' complaints texts describe the adverse impact of personal matters that they perceive to be outside of their control but which they feel should be accommodated by the university. The complaint is that such matters have not been recognised in reaching an academic decision, albeit that they have not been previously advised by the student:

*...my ethnicity is Pakistani/Indian explaining the cultural difficulties I have been facing for the past time.*

(Student 78S)

This UK student explains that issues of forced marriage and deteriorating relationships with all members of her family have resulted in her failing her studies. The student continues to attend class despite having failed the year and not having disclosed this to her family. Complaints encompassing ethnicity factors focused complaints are characterised by late notification following the release of a student's results and with a prior reluctance to disclose

those matters at the point they occur. It is only when their academic position is threatened that cultural sensitivity about seeking help is overcome.

Whilst Baker et al's (2013) research endorses the role of cultural (ethnic) individualism in determining the nature of the emotional response to complaints, at Riverside there is a commonality of response irrespective of ethnicity. In escalating an appeal to university level, student complainants at Riverside have all acted in an individualistic way. They have overcome any cultural tendency based on nationality or ethnic background that might mitigate the wish to initiate formal complaint action. This reinforces the 'acculturation' link with complaint behaviour identified by Hart (2009) and evidences that it extends beyond nationality to ethnicity factors. Acculturation in respect of complaint behaviour is advanced; to protect their award students can assume a complaint style that overcomes lived national or ethnic history.

Ethnicity focused factors are significant in raising matters of complaint that are personal to the student. In complaining, students expect the university to accommodate the constraints imposed by ethnic requirements and address academic decisions accordingly

*Please do not judge me on events that were to a large degree impossible for me to control.*  
(Student 89E)

Interview participants confirm the expectation that the university should be supportive in matters that are particular to the individual student's circumstances:

### **The Interview: Student 78Z**

*Understanding in every situation that students undergo, especially to overseas students that miss obvious family and friends support in every circumstances.*

Yet whilst ethnic factors are featured by student complainants as the rationale for poor academic performance, ethnicity is not the determining factor in driving student complaint behaviour. Ultimately it is the threat to student achievement that drives a common response irrespective of ethnic or national cultural background challenges.

#### **4.5 Discourse analysis and power issues**

The literature review identifies discourse analysis to be of potential relevance. Greener (2011) promotes a natural link between Grounded Theory techniques and the intent of his definition of discourse analysis as reviewing 'text within context' (p.99). He stresses an emphasis on analysis of the influence of the social background against which the text is produced or, moving to critical discourse analysis, how texts might evidence the power relations at play in the social issue under review. He sees GT as one means of exploring documents for identifying forms of discourse.

The analysis of student texts identifies a language of dependency from the student complainant in the university environment. The complainant is positioned as vulnerable, struggling within CCC10 *Encountering a hostile environment*, seeking support in CCC16 *Tell me what to do!* with considerable personal challenges and when support is not

forthcoming challenging university staff about their academic standing within CCC11  
*Expecting a qualification by right – ‘The Deal’.*

Award authority puts academic staff in a strong position and reinforces student vulnerability. Prior research indicates that concern about academic reaction is a consideration for student complainants. Su and Bao (2001) and Mukherjee et al (2007) see relevance in the power imbalance between university and student; they conclude that the majority of students complain to their peers rather than ‘voice’ their complaints through formal complaint channels. The research sample at Riverside is drawn from the ‘Voicers’ (Su and Bao, 2001), from those students who have felt empowered to complain. Written complaints furnish minimal direct comments from students regarding their position in the university/student relationship. One student observes:

*I said at the time that I would like a second opinion but stupidly and I regret this very much, I did not push for fear of upsetting her and the department. I felt that if I ‘rocked the boat’ and upset the department that this could go against me in the future with regard to getting help, grading references etc.*

(Student 78AA)

Another complainant’s mother states that her son thought his degree might be threatened if he submitted a complaint. Interviews are therefore the opportunity to explore any fundamental concerns about the perceived power base of the university.

Students are asked how they felt about initiating a complaint. Some are intimidated:

**The Interview: Student 90H**

*She made me so scared...I felt it was useless to put complaint, and I believe student cant get any help through this procedure in the future. Student should be encouraged instead of discourage.*

**The Interview: Student 67G**

*I was scared to death....There was me just a student who could not get work done and who had to redo a year of her course and then there was them an institution full of people that you look up to as professors and academics who have been in teaching for years. To me I had no chance in hell compared to all their knowledge and experience.*

Students 90H and 67G are the only students to be supported by Riverside's Students' Union and a staff member of the Student Services department. As an international and disabled student respectively they feel weak and susceptible in a conflict scenario yet with help they are motivated to pursue a formal complaint. There is strong personal motivation to do so. Student 90H is failing a Master's Degree and seeks a re-mark of all work; student 67G feels forced to leave her course and advises that her motivation is to ensure that other disabled students do not undergo the same traumatic experience.



Student 67F's experience demonstrates that complaint action can result in an academic backlash. Following her complaint submission, she experiences a number of incidents where the attitude of staff reflects their overt resentment of her complaint. At one point an academic fails to forward her a requested essay:

**The Interview: Student 67F**

*When I asked why he hasn't sent it to me he made a comment about being 'scared of being sued' for bothering me whilst being ill following my track record with the uni. He then said it didn't matter anyway as no doubt I wouldn't submit it and get a higher mark by getting my MP onto them. I was so mad..... at times tutors would ask if I was bothering to do an essay or sit the exam..... generally I just felt that staff wanted nothing to do with me.*

Post-complaint aggression by academic staff reflects a continuation of the hostile environment identified in students' complaints submissions (*CC6 Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice*). This is not unique to Riverside: the Cooper-Hind and Taylor (2012) study observes that students remain deterred from submitting complaints by fear of reprisal from academic staff.

Riverside interview participants confirm that students remain worried about submitting complaints but that staff reaction is not sufficient enough to diminish the 'Voicers'. There

are factors that override wariness of pursuing the complaint. Student 67F is ultimately dismissive of the vengeful stance taken by academic staff: *It was all very childish behaviour from seemingly intelligent professionals* and remains determined to continue; she advises she is motivated by a need to ensure the same situation does not happen to others and to *safeguard my own grades*. Student 67G, a mentally fragile student, uses her anger and frustration as a support to push her complaint forward and, in line with the characteristic consumer complaint behaviour, reacts to the dismissive response to her initial complaint with an enhanced determination to escalate her dissatisfaction. The power dynamics in these examples place the relationship between student and the academic environment in a more complex scenario than the conventional institutional dominance imposed by assessment authority. Here the university's position is shaken by students who have a personal stake in the outcome of the complaint issue which overcomes their awareness of the challenges of the complaint journey. In these examples the power relationship between the university, embodied by academic tutors, moves in the direction of the Foucault (1994) model; established dominance is moulded and negotiated potentially by both parties but in these examples it is the emotional standing of the student that empowers them and carries weight within the particular circumstances prevailing. In moving to a formal complaint these students place the university and its staff in the destabilised position engendered by the climate of moral panic surrounding university level complaints.

#### **4.6 Tuition fees and the student as consumer**

CCC11 *Expecting a qualification by right* – ‘*The Deal*’ arises from one Master’s degree student who writes:

*I cannot imagine coming all the way from Nigeria and spending over £12,000 on fees and hall accommodation, then I would be left with a post graduate diploma, that wasn't the deal, the deal is a Master's degree. If I was told I would achieve a PGD after all the effort, I would have just stayed back in Nigeria and not spent this much, £12,000 is so much money in Nigeria.*

(Student 67E)

This raises the spectre of students' expectation of an academic award as the result of paying fees. An assumption about the correlation between higher fees, increased student expectations and a consequent rise in the number of complaints has prevailed within the higher education sector across the course of this case study (OIA, 2010; Coughlan, BBC Educational News, 2010; Jones, 2006 and 2010; Buckton, 2008). Individual Key Point (KP) Codes are therefore analysed for any perspective from individual students on fees that might provide commentary on those assumptions. At Riverside only seven students of the 91 complaints texts analysed as part of the documentary review mention tuition fees. Four are international students where the fees link is closely aligned to achieving their degree. This results in two Key Points from the initial coding process: KP14 *Having financial problems* and KP24 *Not getting value for money*.

KP14 captures students' expressions regarding financial struggles, whether finding additional money to finance resit charges or the impact of debt sanctions on ability to study. This is often part of an explanation for poor performance. KP24 includes students' statements on lack of physical resource (library books) and perceptions of strain on staff resource where a student is complaining about dissertation supervision and dissatisfaction

with a unit result. Tuition fees are mentioned within the context of debt but not in terms of raised expectations of university provision:

*I am left wondering what the point of completing this year would be for me; as I would be getting even further into debt without gaining any of the rewards this degree could have given me.* (Student 89M)

One student challenging the award of a third class degree authorises his parents to act on his behalf with the comment that *Attending university is a large investment by any standards a comment frequently made at the graduation ceremony*. The inference is not entirely clear: the student's view is that he deserves a higher classification but the broader argument is about his perceptions of lack of appropriate support and delivery errors rather than deserving a better degree as a result of financial investment made. A student challenging a borderline classification complains about value for money in his final year where timetabled teaching is at a minimum:

*I certainly didn't pay just over £3000 this year just so my tutor could neglect giving me sufficient help in preparing my dissertation and certainly not look at it the day before I give it in. I got no way near the value of money I paid for this year in general.* (Student 90L)

Whilst this has tones of a consumerist discourse the full focus of the student's complaint is dissatisfaction with his classification since the student expected a higher outcome based on personal effort. Interview participants are asked for their views on value for money issues.

They reflect that university is an expensive choice, leading to debt and that the university carries the responsibility of a service provider:

*The students expect to receive skills and knowledge that will allow them to develop and grow in an area they have specifically chosen. This is the same with any training courses provided by companies in specific skills or work disciplines, you/the company pays – you expect a service and to learn in return.*

(Student 89A)

Yet this is not about a finance based transactional approach; irrespective of paying fees, this student expects to contribute in terms of effort. The university could reasonably expect that *the student will participate in classes, lectures and complete work required to achieve desired results* (Student 89A) and ... *I would expect to give 100% to my course and the same from all students, with students who don't comply being failed or kicked off course* (Student 67C).

Two interview participants raise fees within the context of refunds and as relevance for action if students are dissatisfied. Student 67G likens the university to a 'market trader' who will not give refunds if they sell a faulty product. This student has been withdrawn and her comments relate to the scale of debt she is left with on failing to complete her award. Student 89A views herself as a customer paying for tuition and believes that customer care can only improve if the university is made to lose income through issuing tuition fee refunds. Another, Student 67F, thinks mass lectures are poor value for money and should be available online. There is no consistent message about fees from student interviewees; one

international student, who does not achieve his award, still remains confident that fees represent value for money:

*Student definitely is benefiting for which they paid and academics standard of university are excellent (sic).* (Student 90H)

Molesworth et al (2009) draw on personal experience in an institution similar to Riverside, 'a vocational HE institution' (p.279), to conclude that students believe a good degree is their right having paid fees and that the drive for an upper second classification is due to the perceived bargaining power with employers. The authors argue that it is the vocational nature of the university and the dominance of market principles that promotes this student view. Svensson and Wood (2007) take a similar stance:

This focus on the marketing paradigm, we contend, has led some students to perceive that admission to the degree and the payment of attendant fees are equal to the conferral of the degree. They have 'bought' the product and so assume that they have 'ownership' of it from the first days of their degree studies.

(Svensson and Wood, 2007, p.27)

Costs (tuition fees) are mentioned by Riverside complainants as being high in respect of international students but the dialogue of financial transactional that argues payment of fees should result in a particular level of service, or the achievement of an award, is quoted by only one student in 2008-2009:

*It is very discouraging that now I fail to get the qualification I paid for just because of one assignment.* (Student 89K)

Those interviewed have some experience of complaining outside of the university. However they are not experienced consumers and notions of being a customer are immature; responses given to 'value for money' aspects are given because the question is asked. Maringe and Gibbs (2009) recognise that across the course lifecycle students wear different 'hats' dependent on what they are engaged in; it is only when engaged in complaining that they wear their customer hat. Woodall et al (2012) also assert that students can be customers at certain points and may from time to time behave as customers. These embryonic customer concepts most adequately represent the low level of consumer engagement displayed by student complainants at Riverside University.

Consumerist pre-occupation with value for money or transactional messages about eligibility for awards based on fees paid is not present; tuition fee levels in themselves are not a driver of student complaint behaviour. Riverside is an acknowledged 'widening participation' university. It is within the top 30 universities for the proportion of entrants from state schools and low participation neighbourhoods and the top 50 universities for the proportion of entrants from the designated lower social classes. Research into the possible impact of increased tuition fees (Pennell and West, 2005) identifies lower income students being the most debt averse and cost conscious and therefore the most alert to value for money issues. What minimal comment there is in student texts about fees reflects concern about debt but, in line with Moore et al's (2011) research into pre-university perceptions of the value of higher education by young people, financial costs are secondary to the lifetime advantage of having a degree, often articulated in terms of future employment opportunities. There is no evidence that fees and the associated discourse of consumerism influence student complaint behaviour at Riverside University.

#### **4.7 Chapter conclusion**

Data analysis demonstrates the outcomes of a complementary mixed-methods approach, confirming that complaint areas at Riverside University reflect the HE sector's preoccupation with assessment matters and that, in common with the national picture, there is a proportionally small number of students who progress complaints formally.

Research design supports analytical development. The GT theory approach to the analysis of students' written complaints explores messages from the key quantitative data previously identified, primarily the potential impact of ethnic diversity and the 'triggers' for complaint behaviour around academic failure. The interview process offers individual complainants the opportunity to comment further and to corroborate messages from text analysis, such as the emerging significance of degree classifications and the implementation of Riverside's extenuating circumstances procedure which is identified as a challenging process by students in complaint texts. This offers a rare insight into the complaint experience for the higher education student engaging with the process at a post-1992 university. Whilst GT techniques take an inductive approach they also support the need to explore practitioner pre-occupation with the impact of tuition fee rises and significant areas identified in the literature review, including any impact of consumerism and the interplay of power relations between student and university.

In an establishment where the core business is education, the learning environment itself shapes dissatisfaction at Riverside University. The volume of complaints may be small but analysis confirms the impact of the complaint journey to be exceptionally stressful within the context of students' often complex lifestyle challenges. The response to the hostility of the complaint process is marked by a commonality in student behaviour irrespective of



ethnic or national cultural ideology and the level of tuition fees paid; the persistence of student complaint behaviour reflects the value students place on their award.

The student complaint experience at Riverside University mirrors aspects of consumer complaint behaviour. Literature in the services marketing arena stresses the need for customer recovery through proactive complaint management. The ‘service recovery paradox’ (Stone, 2011, p.12) can mean an increase in customer satisfaction; complainants emerge from a complaint scenario with an enhanced perspective of the company as a result of the complaint experience. The conclusions and recommendations emerging from this case study provide important messages that will support complaint prevention, improve complaint management and offer a positive complaint experience for dissatisfied students attending Riverside University and potentially institutions with a similar culture in the higher education sector.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this case study is to determine the nature of student complaint behaviour at Riverside University by responding appropriately to the key research question, ‘**What influences students to submit formal complaints?**’; the secondary research questions support exploration and resolution primarily through the qualitative research tools of GT analysis of complaint texts and subsequent interviews. Table 9 below summarises the evidenced outcomes of the research prompted by the secondary questions which feed in to conclusions regarding student complaint behaviour at Riverside University:

Research Area	Secondary Research Questions	Response
<i>The complainants:</i>	Does the volume and profile of student complainants at Riverside University reflect the national picture?	Comparison with the numbers of OIA cases set within the context of national HE student numbers (Table 4) confirms that Riverside reflects the same small % of student complainants and mature/postgraduate numbers. p.95.
	What is the profile of student complainants (gender/ethnicity/status)?	A notable percentage (36%) are of an ethnic minority with 21% being international students. Challenge with the data here reflect the OIA challenge of securing personal data that is on a voluntary basis. p.99.
	How many times have complainants submitted formal complaints at university level	Established via the interview process. Students confirm raising a single complaint across the course.
<i>The complaint issues:</i>	What are Riverside University’s students complaining about?	Confirmed by text analysis and evidenced in Table 6 ‘Trigger for Student Complaints 2006-2007 to 2009-2010’. p.99.

Research Area	Secondary Research Questions	Response
	What do complainants think the university can reasonably expect from them as students?	Established via interview process. Students confirm an expectation that they meet their part of the psychological contract through making personal effort.
	Do students' complaints reflect any concern about employment?	There is evidence from some students that complaint behaviour reflects perceptions of employment prospects being linked to a 'good' degree. p.134-136.
	Do complaints reflect any issues relating to student feedback or involvement in course delivery?	No comment in complaint texts or interviews. Single individual student comment about the nature of specific feedback (p.126) but not a generic complaint issue.
	What outcomes are complainants seeking from their complaint submission?	To have a poor mark or failed assessment amended which they feel is part of 'The deal' towards the award. p.124.
	Do students' complaints reflect any concerns relating to contact time with academic staff?	Student complaints' texts evidence stated student difficulty in securing appointments with individual academic staff. The concern is contact for personal support not in terms of taught academic contact. p.108.
<i>The complaint experience:</i>	What does the student complainant feel about their experience of the university's complaint process?	A single student text comments on the complexity (p.112). A mixed view is given by complainants.
	Do international students have any difficulties approaching the complaints process that might not be experienced by non-EEA students?	There are no cultural challenges identified in texts or interview relating to international students only.

Research Area	Secondary Research Questions	Response
	Do students seek help with the complaints process and who supports them	Only 2 students mention help from the Students' Union (p.132). 'Helicopter parents' are evidenced (p.131) and one interviewee advises that help was sought from a member of Student Services staff.
	Do students have any concerns about submitting a formal complaint?	One student is stated by a parent to be worried that he will be penalised if he complains. (p.131). Interviewees evidence concern about going ahead with a complaint but it is overcome within the context of their frustration. p.161.
	In what way do students' emotions impact complaint behaviour?	There is a depth of emotional response evidence by text analysis and student interviews which drives a resilience in complaint behaviour. p.163.
	Do students discuss their complaints with university staff during the complaint process?	One interviewee advises that help was sought from a member of Student Services but students state they do not feel supported. p.132.
<i>The customer/consumer experience:</i>	Do students consider themselves as customers of the university?	Those interviewed have some experience of complaining externally but they are not experienced consumers and notions of being a customer are immature. p.153.
	Do students believe they have any rights as a student of the university?	The concept drawn from student texts of 'The Deal' (p.124) raises complainant understanding that a qualification is their right if they make effort. Student interviewees confirm an expectation that they receive the relevant skills and knowledge. p.186.

Research Area	Secondary Research Area	Response
	Is the 'student as customer' concept evident from students themselves?	Not evidenced in complaint texts. Only one interview participant views herself as a customer paying for tuition and that customer care can only improve if the university loses income through issuing tuition fee refunds. p.151.
	Are tuition fees perceived to be providing good value for money by student complainants?	This is not evident in student texts. There is no consistent message about fees from student interviewees. One states that mass lectures are poor value whilst an international student, failing his award, still remains confident that fees represent value for money. Responses given to 'value for money' aspects are given simply because the question is asked. p.151.
	Is the student an experienced consumer such that they arrive at university accustomed to complaining in other areas of their life?	Those interviewed have some experience of complaining outside of the university. However they are not experienced consumers and notions of being a customer are immature; responses given to 'value for money' aspects are given because the question is asked. p.153.
	What, if any expectations, do students have of the university?	Student texts evidence the expectation of achieving their award as exemplified within CCC 11: Expecting a qualification by right - 'The Deal'. p.123. Student interviewees state an expectation of support from teaching staff and support with personal issues (p.188) which is also reflected generically across complaint texts.

Research Area	Secondary Research Questions	Response
	What do students think of the university's approach to 'customer care'?	Not evidenced in complaint texts. Interviewee feedback is variable with one student linking this to potential for improvement if fees are refunded (p.151); another notes that customer care outside of the learning environment is good.

**Table 9: Evidenced outcomes to secondary research questions**

The research outcomes of the secondary questions evidence that complaint behaviour at Riverside University is characterised by strong emotion, fuelled by the hostility of the complaint experience and driven by the extreme frustration of student complainants disappointed by poor academic achievement and the associated threat to their final award which represents their future aspirations.

This summary conclusion reflects the significance of the complainants' personal, rather financial, investment in higher education and the dominance of the emotional aspect of the student complaint journey. This emerges from complaint texts and is confirmed as a strong characteristic of complaint behaviour via the interview process. Aligning with consumer based research an emotional response is a high profile feature of complaint behaviour at Riverside University. A poor complaint experience can have a devastating and lasting impact on the individual. The passage of time does not dilute the impact of the failed complaint which, as stated by ex-students, has impact not only in a failed academic outcome but in damage felt to personal confidence. The outcome of the complaint remains a live experience.

## 5.1 The emotional complainant

Emotions play an important role in whether a customer will complain and the language expressed in the complaint.

(Mattson et al, 2004, p.942)

Student complainants exhibit high levels of negative emotion, an aspect of response to poor service delivery recognised in commercial complaint literature (Gustaffson, 2009; Schoefer and Diamantopoulos, 2008). Students lack inhibition in their responses and offer personal insights that are expansive in their detail of personal problems, notably in CC8 *Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail* and in their struggles within the hostile learning environment described in CCC10 *Encountering a hostile culture*. This candour is also displayed by interview participants, thus supporting prior research experience of email interviews (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006; Gruber et al 2008) which observes that respondents proffer detailed responses, often lengthier than those garnered in a conventional interview scenario.

Student interviews evidence that the emotion of the complaint experience still surrounds an issue that occurred, in some instances, over six years ago. Complainants furnish profoundly personal responses. They have not forgotten the complaint matter; to some these are still live issues:

### **The Interview: Student 67G**

*This whole situation has had a major effect on my life and I still suffer with major depression over my whole university experience. While writing this I have been in tears I never thought that me wanting to gain a degree would have such a massive adverse effect on my mental and emotional health. I have lost all faith in our educational system.*

This reflects Cooper-Hind and Taylor's (2012) research in a UK university where students considering a formal complaint felt '...insulted, sad, stressed and uncomfortable' (p.67). Students may not think in consumerist terms but the emotional aspect of their complaints mirrors the consumer 'cognitive appraisal process' (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998) that reacts to the stress associated with those complaint issues determined as being significant.

Services marketing research identifies the impact of a poor complaint experience in shaping a consumer's emotional response. In their interviews, Riverside complainants confirm the indicators in written texts that student complainants experience 'triple deviation' (Edvardsson et al, 2011). At the point of submitting their complaint students have already experienced extreme frustration with the complaint issue and their subsequent attempts to resolve matters informally with staff. This is the 'double deviation' effect (Loo et al, 2013; Casado-Diaz and Nicolau-Gonzalbez, 2009) which sees complaint behaviour become more emotional as the complainant has another disappointing experience with complaint handling.



The lack of positive response by staff at the point of submitting a written complaint at faculty level ('triple deviation') only serves to embed complainants' position against the university. Tronvoll's (2011) assertion that complaint behaviour is driven by frustration in particular and Baker et al's (2013) conclusions that ignoring early communications of a complaint results in further entrenchment, is evidenced in the behaviour of the dissatisfied students at Riverside.

The representation of postgraduate and mature complainants across the research period has no discernible influence on complaint behaviour but ethnicity is an identified feature of complainant behaviour at Riverside, confirming the relevance of cultural issues highlighted in prior research (Chen et al, 2011; Sharma et al, 2010). The complainant's response to university resistance is marked by a heightening of the reaction to the complaint issue and a public intensity of emotion that overrides any perceptions relating to cultural deference or perceived power norms between the university and student. The Riverside experience supports conclusions by Hart and Coates (2010) that any cultural dictates and power differentials are overcome by the 'Voicers' when facing a challenge to personal academic success. 'Acculturation' (Hart, 2009) regarding complaint behaviour is discernible on both national and ethnicity grounds once a student's award is threatened. Thus complainants at Riverside arrive at institutional level with perceptions of frustration, injustice and anger that positions complaint behaviour at its most challenging:

#### **The Interview: Student 67G**

*I thought f\*\*k them. I was going to take this as far as I could...I was so angry that I made my official complaint.*

As Zourrig et al (2009) remark ‘...outraged customers are the most aggressive actors in the workplace’ (p.995). Thus faced with institutional resistance, student complainants remain determined to proceed. Complaint resilience is supported by the complainant’s perception of the value of their final award.

## **5.2 The emotional product: the value of the award**

It has been argued that ‘...consumers perceptions about the appropriateness of complaining may depend on the specific situation encountered, especially the nature of the product’ (Halstead and Droque, 1991, p.215). The more attached a consumer is to a product, the more they are committed to pursuing a complaint (Crié and Ladwein, 2002; Lau and Ng, 2001). Whilst student complainants do not have consumerist tendencies, their behaviour reflects characteristics of consumer complaint behaviour.

As exemplified in CCC11, *Expecting a qualification by right – ‘The Deal’* students have an expectation of achieving an award as a result of their psychological understanding of ‘The Deal’. When not given what they believe they are entitled to as a result of their own efforts the impact is personally devastating. Complainants express strong feelings of unfairness when an assessment is failed. Their expectations are also focused on degree classifications; there is great personal significance attached to achieving the higher award where students have just missed an upper classification. Due to the perceptions of ‘labelling’ attached to the classification students react on a personal level when outcomes do not meet an appropriate standard:

*I am not a second class (lower) degree student... (Student 78W).*

Student texts rarely articulate the significance of the issues they are complaining about or specify a desired outcome. Where they do, they confirm that an award represents more than an academic qualification; it personifies the complainant's future. Haywood et al's (2011) criticism of universities for promoting an unrealistic future lifestyle to their students, with a degree being sold as a passport to personal success, is not evidenced. Riverside complainants remain focused on their future but they do not always specify the detail of their aspirations. Gaining an award is not simply about academic achievement, there is evidence that it is a stepping stone to longer term aspirations. Those interviewed comment on the significance of higher classifications for future career and study plans. This positions 'The Deal' as slightly more complex than expectations of a qualification in return for perceived personal effort: 'The Deal' is wrapped around a future scenario.

It is noteworthy that when complainants do comment on the implications of academic failure they demonstrate that complaint behaviour at Riverside is prompted by perceptions of employment prospects being linked to a good degree, perceived to be a minimum upper second classification. 'Their desire for a 2:1 is famed primarily by subsequent bargaining power in the job market' (Molesworth et al, 2009, p.279). The premium earning power of a 'good' degree is identified as a possible driver of increased complaints by Harris (2007) and the conclusions of research by Walker and Zhu (2013) confirm that the earning capacity for students with higher classified degrees (first class or upper second class) is much better than that of graduates with lower awards. Yet this wider aspect is not reflected in complaint behaviour at Riverside; employment where mentioned is not articulated in terms of the fiscal reward it might carry.

Complaint behaviour is influenced by the significance of the award and the personal emotional attachment this carries. This influences the decision to complain and pursue that complaint in the face of often substantial resistance. This validates the concern of researchers considering the impact of market forces in higher education and reflecting that the focus for achieving a degree is what can be gained from the market. As such a university education to the student is a transactional rather than transformative experience (Brown, 2011) and focuses on what can be gained by achieving a degree and not what is being developed by way of intellectual learning (Hussey and Smith, 2010; Molesworth et al, 2009). Kandiko and Mawer's (2013) study into student expectations of higher education observes that future employment is key to students entering higher education. There is insufficient evidence in this case study to confirm this conclusion for Riverside complainants. However there is affirmatory evidence that Riverside student complainants from 2006 are thinking beyond the qualification, to the extent that they will challenge the university.

If students see awards as a gateway to something else then, when failing academically, their dissatisfaction is multiplied: with academic failure there is no award and potentially no future. Complaint 'triggers' are focused on award classifications and assessment outcomes because they represent future prospects; in confirmation of Wolf and Czekanski's (2011), findings, student dissatisfaction is heightened where academic failure impacts employment:

*.. I am capable of getting a degree but the facts that took place in my case has ruined my dreams, it has ruined my future life, I had all these plans and it was all set, I knew exactly what I wanted to do as soon as I got my degree but now it's all down the drain in the matter of two seconds. (Student 78S)*

There is a depth of emotion felt by complainants at Riverside that arises from the potentially adverse lifetime impact of the complaint issue. When a student's award is under threat via assessment failure, the impact is much deeper than the disappointment of a faulty product. Student dissatisfaction about low achievement or failure is the key motivator of complaint behaviour:

**The Interview: Student 78Y**

*I was very emotional as this was my chosen career that I had wanted for a number of years and worked hard at college to achieve good A level grades..... I would not be practicing as a ..... and graduating with my peers, which I found extremely difficult.*

The focus on the outcomes of assessment, as encapsulating future plans, is a unifying characteristic within the diversity of the student complaint body. In a research area where nationality and cultural heritage are deemed to shape an individual's complaint behaviour (Woodall et al, 2012; Su and Bao, 2011; Chen et al, 2011; Hart and Coates, 2010; Sharma et al, 2010) and in a student body that reflects significant ethnic diversity, there is commonality in complaint behaviour, with students' complaints generated by a threat to their award outcomes. The focus on assessment and associated concerns about their future by complainants at Riverside refutes some of the earlier research views (Gibbs and Knapp, 2002; Lomas, 2007), and perpetuated anecdotally by the higher education media and university administrative practitioners (Jones, 2006 and 2010), that student dissatisfaction is influenced by students' payment of tuition fees.

It endorses the research of those who believe that the consumer concept is too simplistic to explain student behaviour in higher education (Eagle and Brennan, 2007) and supports the later student centric research (Bates and Kaye, 2013; Moore et al, 2011) evidencing that students entering higher education in the changing fees regime are not focused on the level of fees being paid or the associated risk of financial debt.

Student complainants do not always articulate their complaint within the context of future career plans; the immediate focus is academic failure. Academic failure represents the duality of the understanding of higher education held by Riverside complainants: learning is achieved via a transactional process and carries instrumental expectation.

### **5.3 The layered complaint**

The significance of the award as an identified ‘trigger’ for student complaint behaviour is noteworthy. Complaint behaviour at Riverside University exhibits a dual-layered complexity that is not evidenced in the literature review of commercial consumer complaint behaviour. The student may be dissatisfied with a number of issues across time, yet these are tolerated until the point at which ‘The Deal’ (the award) is threatened. When the longer term ramifications of prior incidences of dissatisfaction become clear e.g. unit failure or a failure to achieve a perceived ‘good’ degree, student discontent regarding historical issues of tolerated discontent is ‘triggered’ as a formal complaint. Whilst the initial focus is the threat to the award, the substance of the complaint sits with the prior factors that the student now recognises as contributory e.g. errors in marks, non-receipt of coursework, limited staff availability. These second layer issues are those that should be of concern to educational managers.

The layered complaint, with its overarching ‘trigger’ issue contrasts with the commercial environment where research within the literature review of this case study (e.g. Sharma et al, 2010; Volkov, 2004; Boote, 1998) identifies a *range* of possible ‘triggers’ based on social characteristics (cultural/demographic) that move the consumer from discontent to complaint ‘relating to a consumption *episode*’ (Volkov, 2004, p.115). Where a complaint involves academic matters, student complainants may experience a range of issues causing dissatisfaction but a perceived threat to their award is the single unifying ‘trigger’ to move dissatisfaction to complaint behaviour in higher education.

#### **5.4 Transactional and instrumental learning**

The consumerist discourse in higher education continues to influence perceptions of student motivation about learning, with the securing of an award being viewed as a commercial transaction not a learning achievement. This is seen to result in a student’s belief that a degree is their right as a result of fees paid and failure to obtain that degree will result in increased complaints (Kaye et al, 2005; Brown, 2011; Hussey and Smith, 2010). Education becomes a business arrangement formalised through the fees regime (Svensson and Wood, 2007; Molesworth et al, 2009). This transactional approach is not evident at Riverside. There is, however, evidence of exchange expectations by student complainants of another kind; the currency is not finance but personal effort. Analysis of students’ complaints texts indicates that students consider that what they give to the course in personal effort carries transactional expectations in terms of achievement. Where effort is expended then academic achievement is anticipated.

The transactional perspective at Riverside is a relationship where students expect support from academic staff and expect personal success as an outcome of following university

procedures and making personal effort. Within CCC10 *Encountering a hostile culture* students express frustration at lack of access to academic staff, echoing a conclusion of the Cooper-Hind and Taylor (2012) study that students have expectations of consistent academic support. Students' complaints texts evidence the complexity of lifestyles reflecting the diversity of the student body and expressed at length in CC3 *Experiencing an extenuating circumstance* and CC8 *Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail*.

Students expect support in resolving these issues and that personal lifestyle challenges should mitigate academic performance. Students complain and ask via CCC16 *Tell me what to do!* when both personal and academic challenges threaten achievement of their award and the lack of support and communication in the academic environment has failed them. Where academic advice is available, and they follow it, then the personal effort expended is deemed to warrant reward in terms of achievement. Student complaints' texts reveal a psychological contract discernible within CCC11 *Expecting a qualification by right - 'The Deal'* and resulting in CC13 *Challenging the university*; student complaint behaviour is a reaction to the failure of this contract. Students emphasise in their complaints that they have followed assessment processes (CC4 *Adherence to university procedures*) and they have expended personal effort (CC17 *Promoting personal effort*). The expectation is that this individual effort is rewarded through the assessment process:

In this tit-for-tat exchange, students may feel entitled to results (e.g. grades, diplomas) for their inputs (e.g. effort, time, tuition) regardless of whether they meet a university's educational requirements.

(Finney and Finney, 2010, p.278)



Where 'The Deal' does not deliver on this exchange theory aspect of the psychological contract and the student is deprived of their award or assessment due to academic failure they experience extreme personal disappointment that is heightened by the adverse ramifications for personal prospects. Behaviour at Riverside does not reflect Finney and Finney's (2010) conclusion that it is primarily those students who see themselves as customers that will complain but that the act of complaining itself does not mean a student is any more involved with their learning. Riverside complainants do not display customer tendencies but do complain despite a challenging complaint environment and do have a view they are engaged with their learning.

Students' complaints at Riverside University evidence a dominance of dissatisfaction with grading. 'Grades are high stakes and are the basic currency of educational systems; they can result in both immediate benefit and longer-term consequences for students' (Gynnild, 2011, p.63). Student complainants feel they are *Deserving better outcomes* (CC14) because of the personal effort and commitment to the assessment process (transactional learning) and because the consequences can mean they do not have the expected qualification to pursue a planned career (instrumental learning). This is reflected most strongly in the volume of complaints about degree classifications. Potts' (2005) view that consumerism is shaping students' view of universities as 'degree mills' (p.63) is being realised but it is future aspirations rather than consumerism that is the influence. Students' reaction to the implications of academic failure is the driving influence on complaint behaviour.

The prevailing views of student complainants at Riverside University during the research period have roots in the conclusions of an empirical study undertaken early in the fees regime (Rolfe, 2002) researching students' expectations of higher education:

- A higher proportion of current students in the UK go to university for career reasons than in the past;
- Today's students are less interested in their subject and are more interested in vocational aspects of their studies;
- Students are less able or willing to undertake independent study than they were ten or more years ago, and expect more instruction and guidance from teaching staff.

(Rolfe, 2002, p.180)

Rolfe's conclusions are drawn from the comments of lecturing staff. This case study now reflects similar conclusions from student feedback. It responds to the key research question **'What influences students to submit formal complaints?'** with evidence that student complaint behaviour at Riverside University is initiated primarily by failed expectations of the assessment process resulting in a consequent threat to future plans; where specified these encompass future personal opportunities, either further study or employment. Complaint behaviour is then sustained by the hostility of the complaint experience at Riverside University.

Rolfe's (2002) study reflects the views of the individual academics from which the author draws conclusions about the changing environment of higher education. The 'student voice' as expressed within students' complaints at Riverside now also sends messages about the nature of the evolving relationship between the university and its students. From the practitioner perspective a greater understanding of this relationship aids the management of student expectations and the provision of a supportive complaint experience as being in the best interests of the student and the university.

## **CHAPTER SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS**

There is a responsibility upon the university to understand student needs and to be accountable for changing what is appropriate. However this needs to reflect a culture of betterment, not of bureaucratic completions and closure.

(Maringe and Gibbs, 2009, p.42)

By virtue of the profile of its students, its course portfolio and the subject specialisms of its staff, Riverside University may carry a uniqueness in the internal conditions that influence student complaint behaviour. Pring (2004), however, promotes the ‘uniqueness fallacy’ (p.208) claiming that whilst there may be a unique aspect to any identified behaviour or case, nothing is unique in every aspect; there is always some commonality that allows for explanations to be made around a broader framework. Practitioners in the higher education sector must be mindful of this and also consider whether they experience an *aha!* moment (Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009, p.170) when reviewing the analysis and subsequently considering how far the recommendations for improved practice outlined here are relevant within their own institutions.

As evidenced, a complaint can arise from a situation that is personally devastating to the individual student and it is important that issues raised within complaints are addressed in line with Maringe and Gibbs (2009) view. Recommendations are designed to support the student complainant, enhance aspects of the learning environment and minimise Riverside’s risk of exposure to reputational damage. They also recognise the need to learn from the commercial world; consumer complaint research is fulsome on the importance of service recovery (Nimako and Mensah, 2012; Edvardsson et al, 2011; Gruber et al, 2011; Huppertz, 2007) for managing customer relations and customer retention. A supportive complaints

culture has the potential to improve the student experience at Riverside and potentially contribute to an improvement in student retention rates in the university environment (Ekiz et al, 2008; Webb and Jagun, 1997). Importantly, recommendations here reflect the views of student complainants themselves.

## **6.1 Further research**

Student complaint behaviour at institutional level is exhibited by less than 1% of the student body. Prior research (Su and Bao, 2001; Mukherjee et al, 2007) shows that the majority of potential complainants feel unable to voice their complaints and research based on submitted complaints may not be representative of student dissatisfaction. Given the evidenced personal significance of their award, it is of concern that some students may feel unable to progress their dissatisfaction or may engage in negative ‘word of mouth’ activity (Lau and Ng, 2001). Lack of consistency in faculty archiving strategies resulting in gaps in accessible complaints texts inhibited research into faculty level complaints across the period of this case study. Further research is recommended into the first stage of the complaints process at faculty level to ascertain why students do, or do not, progress complaints to the university stage; ethical clearance to pursue research with current rather than past students would be beneficial. This could offer valuable data to support early resolution, and offer further insight in to procedural initiatives required to improve the complaint experience.

Similarly, additional research is required to understand the motivation for student behaviour that sees some complainants progressing their issues to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education. Riverside staff need to understand the personal motivating factors here in order to improve the support to those students facing a continued

stressful situation. It is therefore recommended that the university considers mechanisms to engage with OIA complainants on a research basis.

One of the notable statistics in Riverside's profile is the ethnic diversity and this is reflected as a factor in complaints. The challenges of isolating ethnicity data and aligning it to nationality have been noted. To date, research and operationally Riverside itself, focuses on supporting the student experience on the basis of declared nationality; here the challenges for international students are appreciated and have emerged as an individual Core Category. However difficulties experienced from the wider ethnic perspective must be explored. As an institution with an ethnic minority base the university must undertake additional research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges to students with ethnic backgrounds from the UK and EEA, as well as international students; in order to mitigate against complaints the university needs an awareness of the challenges being faced by all ethnic minority students in the community. This is an important piece of supplementary research in view of the diversity of the student body and student expectation that Riverside University is supportive.

## **6.2 Manage the emotion**

As this case study of Riverside University completes (2014) the Office of the Independent Adjudicator is introducing a best practice framework for managing students' complaints. This intends to encourage a swifter approach to processing complaints but it cannot address the institutional culture within which a complaints procedure operates. There is some minimal comment from Riverside complainants concerning the complexity of the complaints policy but the real focus of dissatisfaction is the environment in which procedures are applied. Riverside must manage the hostility of its internal cultural approach to

complaints characterised within CCC10 *Encountering a hostile culture* which sees student complainants subject to triple deviation (Edvardsson et al, 2011) and where the complaint journey overshadows the original complaint issue (Cri , 2003).

The university's complaints policy must be reviewed to ensure it fosters a positive culture around complaints by echoing services marketing good practice; this means encouraging early local disclosure, promoting a supportive role by academics and offering training for both academic and support staff to deal with distressed individuals. A positive culture will also help university staff to identify and address areas of concern, thus minimising opportunity for future conflict and improving 'complaint satisfaction' (Gruber et al, 2009, p.637).

#### **The Interview: Student 67F**

*I'm not sure what the university could do to help improve the whole complaint system. They seem to take everything very personally.....It would be nice to have a student welfare office of some sort who was actually on the students side....the one I dealt with was awful. It's a shame the student union can't help in cases like this a bit more. May be post grad students doing it as part of their course.*

This recognises that aspects of student complaint behaviour mirror the services marketing model where customer complaint behaviour is inhibited by perceptions of a poor response (Goodboy and Frisby, 2014), the role of the employee in the early complaint scenario is

critical for recovery (Gruber et al, 2009) and where there is recognition that the act of complaining must be made easier to minimise consumer exit (Huppertz, 2007). Here Webb and Jagun's (2010) conclusions are relevant in recommending a positive approach to customer focused behaviours by staff and the introduction of simple procedural approaches to complaint handling and the empowering of staff to be responsive. Gruber et al (2011) see academic staff involvement as integral to an effective 'service recovery strategy' (p.1263) that focuses on minimising student dissatisfaction through an understanding of their expectations. Chebat and Slusarczyk (2005) recognise the primacy of emotion in complaint behaviour and being dominant over the complaint issue itself:

...contact employees should be aware of the emotional climate of customer's (sic) complaints and should be trained to monitor it.

(Chebat and Slusarczyk, 2005, p.670)

Their recommendation to 'fix the customer then the problem' (p.670) is applicable in the environment of Riverside where complainants feel they experience staff aggression in a complaint scenario. Awareness training for academic staff at Riverside is a priority. This is the student-centred approach to complaints envisaged by Ekiz et al (2008).

Within the learning environment students must feel comfortable when expressing dissatisfaction as part of normal processes and to expect a response on a prompt and informal basis in the first instance; this will minimise the need to move to formal intervention. Tantleff-Dunn et al's (2002) experience in a North American university demonstrates that '...successfully navigating the occasionally rough interpersonal seas may help professors and their students to stay focused on their mutual goals of teaching and learning.' (p.202).

The academic behaviour most valued by dissatisfied students is staff making themselves available to listen to students' concerns.

Whilst early resolution is advocated to avoid formal escalation, students need support at the informal stage. Riverside must make obvious the support mechanisms available to students at all stages of the complaint process in order to minimise the escalation of emotion that characterises the complaint journey at the university. Lack of empathy from staff is not unique to Riverside; student discomfort at approaching academics and the stress experienced by complainants is evidenced in current research (Cooper-Hind and Taylor, 2012; Jackson et al, 2010) but the need to introduce a healthy complaint culture is the more critical at Riverside within the context of the messages from complainants about the hostility of the learning environment and the lack of availability of academic staff.

As suggested by students themselves, the university must publicise nominated independent contacts for students engaging with the complaints process; this should include specialist university staff and student advocates in the Students Union. This could respond to student need to engage external third parties which causes further antagonism in the complaint process. Consumer literature argues that third party involvement '...is solely driven by a complainant's desire to restore justice' (Schoefer and Diamantopoulos, 2008, p.99). It is important, in order to minimise the stress of the complaint process to which students have attested, that a sense of justice for the complainant is evidenced within Riverside's complaints procedures and that there is affirmation that the university will address all matters in a fair and transparent way.



The review of the complaints policy must also form part of a wider review of the communication process with students. This recognises that, as exemplified by student complainants at Riverside, and latterly by Kandiko and Mawer (2013), students can struggle with independent learning. They need, and expect as characterised within CCC16 *Tell me what to do!*, that there is consistent direction in what is required of them. Complainants believe they have suffered from a communications vacuum regarding critical information and that failure by the university to respond to their need for guidance has resulted in them being unaware of matters that subsequently prevent the achievement of their award. The university must consider how key course based information, particularly relating to assessment requirements, can be most effectively relayed to students to ensure a timely response. Here there is also opportunity to respond to complainants' messages in CC12 about *Experiencing poor communications* which emphasise students' expectations that the university will be proactive in forwarding information. Students are not inclined to seek and 'pull' information, they need it pushed to them at the right time.

### **6.3 Manage student expectations**

What's the 'deal' (or to use the technical term, the 'psychological contract') when you join? (Watson, 2009, p.122)

The analysis of complaints sends messages for Riverside about the need to manage student expectations in order to diffuse the emotion around complaint behaviour. This is central to the key areas of complaint: academic support and assessment practice.

Prior research has identified that students may enter university with high expectations of academic support (Rolfe, 2002; Hill, 1995). Students at Riverside complain about being

disadvantaged by academic bad practice (CC6) including particularly the lack of academic staff availability. Student perception of the inadequacy of academic contact time is a current issue in the sector generally (QAA, 2013). Students' complaints about access to staff are therefore not unique but it has been argued that 'widening participation' institutions require a heavier commitment to student support (Morris, 2009) and Riverside must therefore review academic support within the context of the diversity of the student body as a matter of some urgency. As dependent learners, Riverside complainants need consistent help from academic staff but it is also important that this help is also available when students are moving through the complaint process. Students' understanding of access to academic tutors must be managed on entry so that there is clarity to students about when, and where, they can access academic tutors.

Riverside University's complaints are focused on assessment issues. Where students believe they are making academic effort and are unsuccessful, their complaint can focus on a problem in the academic process rather than personal failure. In the commercial world complaint behaviour is constrained where the complainant recognises some personal liability for the failure of a purchased product:

When the consumer feels responsible for the negative outcome, a sense of guilt lessens the chance that such actions as negative word of mouth will be directed at and damage the service provider. (Soscia, 2007, p.889)

As a result commercial companies often promote the responsibility of the purchaser to treat the product in a certain way. Similarly it is appropriate, and in the best interests of students, that expectations of them in the assessment process are emphasised proactively. Williams

(2011) argues that academics themselves ‘...could communicate to students the expectation that studying for a degree will be challenging, require considerable effort and may (indeed should) lead to a questioning of assumptions and prior knowledge – rather than immediate satisfaction’ (p.181). Gynnild’s (2011) research shows that the institution that works hard on a variety of feedback mechanisms to students in order to embed marking standards experiences less complaints. Riverside needs to promote a consistent message about the standard of personal learning and development required to achieve successful educational outcomes.

The Riverside case study reinforces a consistent message evidenced across educational research (Hill, 1995; Kandiko and Mawer, 2013; QAA, 2014) confirming the need to manage student transition to higher education before joining university and during early induction.

#### **6.4 Manage diversity**

The diverse nature of the student body at Riverside, encompassing ethnicity, disability and a range of challenging social issues including mental health, is a feature of complaints within CC6 *Experiencing extenuating circumstances*, CC8 *Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail* and CC18 *Experiencing mental health issues*. As access to higher education has expanded, the profile of the student body reflects the diversity of the wider social community and any associated social complexities this raises (Watson, 2009). Student complaint behaviour is influenced by a personal view that a poor academic performance is the result of undeclared personal circumstances which the student subsequently appreciates they should have disclosed. In some cases this is stated to be due to cultural pressures to retain information within the family: *That I write as much as I did in my appeal is only with*

*the permission of my father* (Student 89E). Student complainants discussing extenuating circumstances evidence a range of significant personal issues, sometimes multiple events for a single student. Students are seeking help but complainants depict their disappointment in engaging with an inflexible extenuating circumstances policy that does not support the complexity of personal issues encompassed within the student body. Students are looking for a personalised response:

#### **The Interview: Student 89A**

*To verbally interact with students in regards to extenuating circumstances, to hold a meeting to allow the student to fully explain the circumstances and perhaps what they are looking for as an outcome of the application process. That they need to assess every case individually and consider that even if the student has taken the correct actions to deal with their circumstances it may still be affecting them and their work as they are dealing with the emotional/mental repercussions.*

With the dominance of ethnic minority students in the complaint sample and the extreme nature of some of their experiences, it is relevant to consider if Riverside's extenuating circumstances policy remains fit for purpose. Research should consider whether Riverside is in a position to initiate additional support measures to prevent these students starting the complaint journey, whilst noting that the core categories in question are amongst only four categories of the Conditional Relationship Guide where the category issue does not occur in

the learning environment. Cultural matters and the wider social issues submitted under extenuating circumstances are primarily home based and it may be questionable how far any university is able, or should be expected to, address these matters proactively. A paper sponsored by the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education on the Future of Student Life and Services (2013) observes that the need to provide students with a personalised service is a feature of the current higher education landscape but one that is difficult to deliver within the resource constraints on student services. Ramsden (2008) also remarks that:

Naïve student expectations are not a new phenomenon; but as we shall see, higher education needs to do more to deal with them.

(Ramsden, 2008, p.3)

Managing expectations is important in a number of areas of the student experience and becomes a more pressing issue if students' complaints are to be managed in the best interest of the student and the university.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP - STUDENT AND UNIVERSITY**

Greater clarity of the relationship between the organisation and student may assist in the resolution of many students' complaints, appeals and perceived grievances.

(Eagle and Brennan, 2007, p. 56)

This case study recognises that recent legislative history has been significant for the UK higher education system, introducing fundamental change that could impact the characteristics of '...a higher education environment that is defined by expert input and assessment' (Carey, 2013, p.252).

The literature review witnesses debate on the varying roles for the higher education student, much of this shaped by government initiatives. The infiltration of business principles resulting in the 'marketisation' of higher education has set students as demanding customers (Eagle and Brennan 2007; Brown, 2011) but this has been university not student driven (Carey, 2013). Consumer research (e.g. Hussey and Smith, 2010; Haywood et al, 2011; Williams, 2011) argues that universities are responsible for student expectations by employing marketing materials that highlight the potential future lifestyle that a degree brings, rather than the intellectual study required for successful engagement. There is intimation of a discourse of intervention in higher education by interested stakeholders (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005) to manipulate the role of university and there are hints of 'The colonisation of universities by industry' (Rochford, 2008, p.48) but further exploration is not within the scope of this case study. The conclusions here are focused on a contribution to the literature on the nature of the student/university relationship and insight is offered from a minority perspective in the literature to date: that of the student. Harris' (2007) survey of

the HE sector observes that many institutions believe that complaint issues do little to impact the university/student relationship since the number of complaints remains low within the context of overall student numbers. However, since consumer research indicates that not all those disaffected engage with the complaints process, the messages from proactive student complainants about their view of their relationship with the university are important.

### **7.1 Academic judgement: the weakening bond**

Tuition fees and the associated role of the student as a customer of the university are not a key concern for Riverside complainants. This supports the body of literature (Maringe, 2011; Hussey and Smith, 2010; Svensson and Wood, 2007) arguing that the use of the customer metaphor in the student-university relationship is inappropriate:

Money may let one purchase and drive a car, but money alone should not let one purchase and possess a university degree...University students must perform to the satisfaction of the university with the product called university education before they are allowed to purchase more of the product. This relationship appears to be unique.

(Svensson and Wood, 2007, p.22)

As represented by complainants, Riverside University is seeing a challenge to its standing as an arbiter of academic standards, the historical key differential in the student/university relationship. The transactional approach to assessment by students sees personal effort as the exchange currency meriting award and particularly where the student has made effort to focus on achieving a particular degree classification. As a result of this aspect of the

student's view of the psychological contract the responsibility for personal academic achievement starts to move from the student to the university:

**The Interview: Student 89A**

*The university is providing a service. The students expect to receive skills and knowledge that will allow them to develop and grow in an area they have specifically chosen. This is the same with any training courses provided by companies in specific skills or work disciplines, you/the company pays – you expect a service and to learn in return.*

Research into the international higher education experience, where fees are well embedded, shows that in the longer term the introduction of fees has had a 'transformatory effect' (White, 2007, p.603) that is not a commercial impact but one which colours how students view their relationship with their university:

What has been lost in the restructuring of university education generally and in the positioning of students as customers in particular is the core role of the university as an educational enterprise...Education has become a consumable commodity for which teachers not students have primary responsibility.

(White, 2007 p.603)

Furedi (2011) expresses the same concern when he observes that under the consumerist influence the relationship between student and university has very little to do with education.



Yet Riverside complainants have not reached the point where they eschew commitment to personal academic achievement. Students' complaints promote their personal effort but their challenges to assessment outcomes do evidence an erosion of the acceptance of the university's academic judgement. This is compounded by the emergence of the instrumental approach to higher education by the Riverside student as considered by Maringe:

It can be argued that the commodification of HE is the concept nearest to the idea of developing a value system in HE which prioritises the instrumental value of education above everything else...In this sense HE institutions become factories for the production of degrees which students can purchase using real money and their brains.

(Maringe, 2011, p.144)

This instrumental view of learning results from complainants' focus on their degree as a means to fulfil future plans. Williams (2011) presses home the point that for students ... 'the process of learning is less important than the outcome of a degree' (p.175) and that this is closely linked to the concept of being employed. Some students do articulate complaints in terms of employment but there is an insufficient volume of evidence to endorse fully Rochford's (2008) views that students view university as a provider of vocational skills and 'job-ready knowledge' (Rochford, 2008, p.45). Complaint behaviour at Riverside validates Rochford's (2008) view of the student perspective that universities are no longer primarily learning communities; the student focus is the outcome of learning (the award) rather than the learning process itself and failure to secure the award is perceived as a failure by the university to deliver the contracted product or 'The Deal'. Yet

Riverside students expect to meet their part of the psychological contract through personal effort to achieve; indeed they can have high expectations of mutual input and effort:

**The Interview: Student 67C**

*I would expect 100% commitment from any university, the best tutors, the best support network, the best facilities all closely monitored and reviewed with student input as well as tutors. In return I would expect to give 100% to my course and the same from all students, with students who don't comply being failed or kicked off a course.*

Students do not expect to fail when they believe they have given their full commitment. They are *Deserving better outcomes* (CC14). From the student perspective there is a trading relationship with the university in which students exchange personal effort for academic credit, irrespective of fees or the standard of that effort. Svensson and Wood (2007) reflect on the mounting challenges to academic judgement and note that in the rush by universities to market their products they fail to advertise caveats about student ability:

Often students are not informed of the level of academic rigour required of a university degree and the fact that not everyone passes and not everyone is deemed as a high achieving student.

(Svensson and Wood, 2007, p.18)

There is an argument, evidenced by Riverside complaints, that students' expectations have not been well managed in terms of assessment practice at tertiary level. This has been recently confirmed in Kandiko and Mawer's (2013) national study for the QAA which comments that 'there was a recurrent theme about transgression of expectations'. (p.63) in relation to students' transition to university and with a particular emphasis on student difficulty in coping with minimum contact time and high levels of self-directed learning. Riverside complaints testify that student complainants are not independent learners and have expectations of consistent support in securing achievement.

## **7.2 The reluctant student partner**

The higher education sector, as influenced by the QAA, is promoting an educational landscape where the learner has influence over what and how they study; recent research (QAA, 2013; Carey, 2013) promotes the emergence of an understanding of the student as a partner or 'engaged collaborator' (Ramsden, 2008, p.5) in learning. Students' complaints at Riverside evidence that this is not matched by students' aspirations. As exemplified in Conceptual Core Category 16 *Tell me what to do!* Riverside students want direction on both an academic and personal level. They consistently seek support with academic needs as they struggle *Encountering a hostile culture* (CCC10) to access supportive academic tutors and with challenging personal issues involving extenuating circumstances. Analysis of complaint texts identifies difficulty accessing academic staff as a consistent theme and the definitions of the Conditional Relationship Guide indicate that students are not independent in resolving circumstances that impact their studies. CC8 *Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail* notes that:

*‘There is recognition that those circumstances are not the University’s fault but the university is perceived by the student to have a role in addressing the injustice:*

*I cannot understand why an unfortunate incident in my life should prevent me from being able to continue my studies like any other person of my age and make me feel excluded from the University’s community or affect my future career by reminding me of this unhappy period of my life.* (Student 90K)

Even when *Challenging the university* (CC13) due to perceived personal disadvantage, the Conditional Relationship Guide notes that *Although the complaint uses challenging terminology the real influence is the need for assistance – the student has nowhere else to go: I am looking for assistance. I am asking for help.....What would you do in my situation? Please help* (Student 78O).

CCC16: *Tell me what to do!* examples incidences where students have been disadvantaged by what they see as failure on behalf of the university to communicate key information to direct their actions. Students particularly dislike Riverside’s extenuating circumstances policy that places the onus on students to make a decision regarding their ability to sit an assessment. Complaints evidence students’ worry about acting independently and disappointment where they feel there has been inconsistent academic support in their studies:

I feel strongly that the support from my tutor might have been more helpful, positive and productive enabling a likely pass in the essay. I feel, to say the least, rather let down.

(Student 78Y)

Students' struggles to act as independent learners is a theme already identified in current empirical studies with students. Cooper-Hind and Taylor (2012), interviewing 27 students seeking support with the university complaint process, observe that a common characteristic of complainants is a sense of frustration, particularly relating to academic support:

It was noticeable that students who considered that they had not received the support they expected from academic staff felt particularly strongly about this, suggesting that students have specific expectations about the role and conduct of their tutors.

(Cooper-Hind and Taylor, 2012, p.68).

Douglas et al's (2014) study of student satisfaction highlights a critical issue for students as being the 'willingness of contact staff to provide help, or giving the impression of being interested in the student; providing support' (p.11). Kandiko and Mawer (2013) note that interviews with students indicate continuing reliance on academic support:

Guidance on how to learn independently was thus much sought after, with absence of such guidance hindering students as they attempted to learn independently in the manner they felt was expected of them.

(Kandiko and Mawer, 2013, p.51).

It is possible that the nature of provision at Riverside University impacts the student experience. Morris (2009) reflects on the 'The Stretched Academy' (p.99), a feature of the post-1992 new universities that have been the most impacted by the widening participation agenda. With an expansion in numbers and pressure on resources the 'stretched academy' responds with larger class sizes and an emphasis on delivery via virtual learning

environments. In an environment in which students entering higher education from the lower socio-economic groups need support, they find that contact and interaction with academic staff is reduced. Resource issues are not addressed in this case study but complainants are clear that access to academic staff is difficult from their perspective.

Despite proactive promotion of student representation via the national quality audit system there is recognition by the QAA itself, in a recent review of the first year student experience, that student willingness to align with the role of partner in quality enhancement is not comprehensive and that ‘...there still exists a gap between the aspirations of the institution and the perceptions of the student...’ (QAA, 2014, p.25).

Students may not be positioned to fulfil the consultative partnership role envisaged by sector level bodies and potentially designed for them by university policies. A recognition of the potential dependency of the student is a pre-requisite for higher education practitioners wishing to manage students’ complaints positively.

### **7.3 Balance of power**

Reflecting on the impact of consumerism in higher education, Naidoo et al (2011) remark on the consequent ‘devalorisation’ (p.1148) of the academic rationale of the university and an erosion of the traditional power base of the university with a particular emphasis on the ‘vulnerable institutions that admit students from disadvantaged backgrounds’ (p.1155). Student complaint behaviour at Riverside confirms that power issues between university and student do not ultimately deter student complainants. This must be qualified by the fact that students who complain at university level are the ‘Voicers’, those students who feel empowered to complain due envisaged threats to their future award and who have negotiated

their own standing within the power influences in the institution. As one student's comments evidence, the 'Voicers' do not represent the full body of complainants and therefore issues of the influence of the power of the university through award authority cannot be ignored:

**The Interview: Student 67C**

*The point I decided to complain was after speaking to other students who were just as unhappy with things...I am afraid this all sounds a little sour grapes style but I was not the only one with issues but was the only one who complained.*

Naidoo et al (2011) also observe that student empowerment remains limited by the university's right to judge academic performance and the student has little opportunity for exit in the same way as a traditional consumer. However, the increasing choice by students to pursue higher degrees is opportunity to demonstrate discontent. Three students in the sample interviewed at Riverside move to alternate institutions for postgraduate courses and reflect on their enhanced experience at those institutions; as students engage increasingly with higher degrees, university dominance through award power diminishes.

From the perspective of the complainants at Riverside, the student relationship with the university is characterised by:

- i. dependency on academic support for learning: students struggle with the concept of independent learning;

- ii. expectations of reward for personal effort expended: academic judgement is challengeable;
- iii. dependency on university support for lifestyle challenges: where personal problems impact on their ability to achieve, students expect help with resolution;
- iv. a focus on their award as embodying future aspirations: the award goes beyond educational significance and thus the university is vulnerable to challenge by the student when academic achievement is threatened.

As practitioners we need, as far as possible, to achieve an understanding of the perspectives of our students in order to put in place appropriate frameworks to support both the student and the university. In researching the student complainant perspective there is confirmation of the continuing need for the university to be clear about its commitments to its students, whether this takes the form of a contract of mutual responsibilities or a charter of expectations. Melear (2003) and Rochford (2008) argue that contract law has invaded the student/university relationship as the concept of the student as consumer has evolved and this now defines the relationship in which university processes can readily be challenged as unfair to the student. Evidence in this case study points to the need for the university to accept the imbalance in the relationship but not with respect to legal liability, rather by recognising the support required by students. Students may not be independent intellectually or personally and protection of their vulnerability requires transparency about the nature of higher education and the demands on its learners. Formal written clarity about assessment standards, academic staff commitment to students and the nature of pastoral assistance available to support personal challenges is essential to harmonise the early and ongoing



relationship between Riverside and the full student body. With communication issues also to the fore with complainants it is important that the written word is supplemented by academic staff in verbal and consistent briefings to their students.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH

...research is not an end in and of itself; rather, research should be a means towards social change, policy change, problem solving, or program development or evaluation .....

(Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009, p. 195)

Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) promote the need for qualitative research to be measured by 'action.' This case study at Riverside University has been a personal journey and testifies to the potential of research as a vehicle for transformational change, both for the researcher and ultimately for the research environment, through action emerging from research outcomes. The experience is captured by Smyth and Holian (2008):

...research conducted from within is worthwhile and special because it can help solve practical problems. It forces us to ground our work in everyday issues as those involved experience them, it confronts us and others with our assumptions, perceptions and their consequences, it enables us to learn, reflect and act and it insists that we engage with what and who we are curious about. Above all it is about learning and making a difference.

(Smyth and Holian, 2008, p.34)

The need to confront assumptions is an important message for educational practitioners with prolonged exposure to educational matters; there is danger that with familiarity personal views and practice become embedded without challenge and with consequent detriment to decisions taken in the learning environment.

## **8.1 'Impressionistic' knowledge**

Eraut's (1997) classification of knowledge includes a key distinction of personal knowledge which may be tacit such that the individual is not explicitly aware of their personal framework and influence on practice '...hence their personal knowledge is not fully under their own critical control, and they should not be confident of validity' (Eraut, 1997, p.41). Since our personal knowledge comes in to play in our professional life on a daily basis Eraut advises that our personal cognitive frameworks should come under regular review.

A similar stance is taken by Argyris and Schon (1974). 'We know more than we can tell and more than our behaviour consistently shows. This is implicit knowledge or tacit knowledge...' (p.10). They reflect that 'When we formulate our theories in use we are making explicit what we already know tacitly' (p.11). Thus how we behave in practice is informed by our tacit knowledge that drives our theories-in-use, how we behave and react in certain situations. As practitioners we may have espoused theories; we may state we will take specific action in specific circumstances but often our behaviour does not reflect our practice. Thus it is our theories-in-use that are most important in dictating what we do. They are influenced by the internalised tacit knowledge that cannot be easily articulated and often reflects broad knowledge that has been acquired after years of experience in a particular environment. As a practitioner in higher education this case study research has shown that tacit knowledge may be influenced by what can only be described as 'impressionistic' knowledge.

On a daily basis practitioners in education are exposed to common scenarios with students as they query, react and respond to the general requirements of university policies and procedures. Within these scenarios there will be vivid exceptional experiences; these

exceptions leave lasting impressions which, unless there is great self-awareness, colour all subsequent engagements with students in that particular arena. So challenging encounters with aggressive parents become a highly publicised discourse around the ‘helicopter parent’ (Somers and Settle, 2010; White, 2005); parental intervention features in Riverside complaints but whilst these can be challenging on an individual basis they remain the exception. The consistently needy and demanding student becomes one of Burke’s ‘high-maintenance students’ (Burke, 2004, p.744) yet we do not meet these students on a regular basis.

Practitioners’ ‘impressionistic’ knowledge may be valid but considered personal thought must be given to the scale of evidence informing it since practitioner views can have wide influence. As this case study notes, statements by the influential Office of the Independent Adjudicator in annual reports linking increases in complaints with rises in student fees have fuelled the higher education sector’s debate on tuition fees as being the driver of students’ complaints. This is not evidenced at Riverside University. Only recently Grove (THES, 2014) quotes a higher education senior administrator publicly declaring that increasing numbers of students are threatening to publicise their grievances, often making libellous remarks about individual staff members, to the extent that confidentiality clauses are needed to keep university business inside the university. This has resulted in a flurry of exchanges across higher education practitioner mailbases about the need to take action on a matter that has no evidential base but is gathering substantial currency for administrative action. Publicised treatises by practitioners, however erudite (Jones, 2006 and 2010; Buckton, 2008), must be informed by a personal reflection on the nature of the cognitive framework forming the basis of public statement.

Grounded Theory techniques are used in this case study to guard against any tacit understandings of students' complaints by a researcher with some 20 years of experience in complaint handling in the higher education sector. Analysing student texts in detail has challenged personal assumptions at a fundamental level. Some of these assumptions are based on irrelevant personal experience as a university student during the fully-funded, non-widening participation era that is a barrier to understanding the complexity of demands on today's students. Other tacit assumptions sit with practical incidences over the years including exposure to aggressive complaints from failing students who have ignored all initiatives to support them. This research has identified these tacit frameworks as impressions that cloud reality.

Research has supported an understanding of the student perspective and an appreciation of the challenges for students experiencing issues of concern and then attempting to address these issues within what they describe as a hostile culture. Pursuing a case study at Riverside has thus acted as a personal evaluation of historical tacit knowledge that has hitherto informed personal professional practice on a consistent basis. Assumptions about student behaviour, and an allegiance to the corporate requirements to manage reputational risk, have coloured personal decisions in the workplace which, on reflection, have not always enhanced the learning environment. Research, particularly via the research tool of grounded theory techniques, has fostered recognition that complaints include lifestyle decisions for students and as such the environment should be receptive to a timely, appropriate and empathetic review of the process. This is not as a reflection of the need to respond to any discourse relating to the student either as customer or learning partner but rather the onus to act in the best interests of educational management.

Practitioners can be in the fortunate position to influence institutional policy. Sikes and Potts (2008) view insider research as ‘...potentially radical. It has the possibility of challenging taken for granted assumptions of all kinds...insider research can be used to effect developmental change: it can make things better’ (p.179). As a result the learning outcomes from research can normally be readily implemented where practitioners are personally motivated to progress change.

There is an important and unexpected message here for personal practice. Practitioners must recognise they may lack awareness of the tacit influences on their daily practice. There is no easy solution to addressing this since extensive research cannot be undertaken in all areas of professional practice on an individual basis. Practitioners must question their underlying assumptions. As advocated by Greenberg and Place (2005) within medical education this involves an extension of Schon’s (1983) reflection-in-action/reflection-on-action to become ‘reflection-for-action’ as a means of advance operational planning. The clinical experience of the medical world more readily lends itself to practical learning but the concept of ‘reflection-for-action’ emphasises the need for practitioners to internalise evidenced experience and learn from it for the purposes of continuous improvement. The discipline of doing so on an individual basis is a formidable challenge and the varying approaches to developing as a reflective practitioner are outside the scope of this case study. However, Greenberg and Place’s (2005) proposal to facilitate practical reflection is proffered here since the questioning process seeks out a direct understanding the tacit knowledge that practitioners use on a daily basis:

Questions encourage critical thinking. They promote self-evaluation, consideration of alternative perspectives, consideration of alternative solutions, and exposure of

ingrained taken-for-granted assumptions. Good questions promote higher-order thinking. They not only facilitate a more in-depth analysis of the situation from multiple perspectives, but they also encourage synthesis of these different viewpoints. Questioning not only enables the individual to evaluate what is really happening in a given situation but also his or her perceived role in that situation.

(Greenberg and Place, 2005, p.4)

Practitioners should consider if they can absorb this within personal individual practice or if this is most effectively progressed on a teamwork basis reflecting on specific initiatives.

## **8.2 Emotional insight**

Reflection also strengthens the importance of ‘emotional insight’ in the research process advocated by Moon (2004) and Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000). Moon (2004) considers the role of emotion in learning and the contribution of an emotional insight into the personal learning process, noting that this is an area neglected in the research literature on reflective learning. The learning emerging from an emotional perspective is less articulated than intuitive; Moon refers to an emotional response that results in a change in personal orientation:

...after an intervention, something seems to happen to the orientation of the learner in a way she perceives her world and, as a result, she may behave differently. She may try to describe this in terms of ‘knowing something different’, but often the change is apparently more profound than the description.

(Moon, 2004, p.51)

The exposure to complainants’ texts through a Grounded Theory lens has supported an

‘emotional insight’ in to the experience of student complainants at Riverside in an administrative functional area where an evidence base rather than emotion prevails. Practitioners in higher education apply policies and procedures consistently with the belief that this will ensure equity. Yet this is not always the fairest approach when dealing with a diverse and heterogeneous student body; procedures cannot be written that accommodate the variety and complexity of personal circumstances experienced and, in particular, the often devastating and multiple experiences of some student complainants within CC8 *Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail*. In considering students’ complaints, those adjudicating must act with empathy and an awareness of the context of the lifelong ramifications of decisions taken.

Researchers need to be open to the potential of research as a mechanism for personal transformational change in addition to the aim of the research itself. When this happens personal development emerging from the research will enhance research outcomes as well as improve personal professional practice for the betterment of the learning environment.



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**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR EX-STUDENT COMPLAINANTS  
PARTICIPATING IN ONLINE INTERVIEWS**

1. What was your complaint about? What motivated you to submit it formally at university level (*i.e. after having already put a complaint to the faculty*)?
2. What outcome were you *looking for* as a result of your complaint?
3. What was the *actual outcome* of your complaint to the university and what you did feel about it?
4. Were there any changes as a result of your complaint? *e.g. either in the university's approach in any way or possibly personally for you moving forward either practically or in an attitudinal sense?*
5. What is your opinion of the university's complaints procedure? *e.g. was it easy/difficult to follow, did you need help, did you know where to go for advice.*
6. How did you feel about putting in a complaint *e.g. did you have any concerns about it/think you should not have had to resort to complaints/not bothered?*
7. Did you feel able to discuss your complaint with a member of staff and if so, who?
8. Did you get any help with your complaint from anyone not associated with the University and did they liaise with University staff on your behalf?
9. How many times did you submit a formal complaint during your course?
10. If you submitted your complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, what motivated you to do that and what were your expectations of how staff there might be able to help you?

11. If your complaint involved your extenuating circumstances, can you comment on your experience of the extenuating circumstances procedure? e.g. was it easy to follow, was your submission successful, did you feel you were supported in handling personal difficulties whilst studying?
12. Can you explain any experience you may have had of complaining in any other environment outside of the university? How did that differ (positively or negatively) with your experience as a complainant at the university?
13. Were there any aspects of university life which failed to meet your expectations and why? Did you feel the need to complain about this? If you did, what was the outcome? If you didn't complain, why not?
14. In respect of tuition fees, do you think students at the university get value for money? If not, could you specify in what areas there are failures and how it could be improved from your perspective?
15. Can you mention any ways in which you might consider yourself to be a customer of the university? What do you think of the university's approach to customer care and how could it be improved if necessary?
16. Thinking back to when you were a student, can you outline what your expectations were of the university generally? (e.g. what are the key things the university should provide or ways in which you expected to be supported?)
17. What do you think the university could reasonably expect from you as a student?
18. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of submitting a complaint at the university?

Christine Millward  
May 2013

## APPENDIX RD.2

### THE CODING PROCESS

Early coding follows the natural flow of the data and analyses the written complaints by academic year; this offers the following advantages:

- i. breaking down the data across the period to manageable groups based on the number of annual complaints, a minimum of 17 and a maximum of 28 students;
- ii. facilitating constant comparison across the academic years;
- iii. supporting the identification of any significant aspect of complaints in any one academic year which would require further exploration at the interview stage.

An early decision to code manually using Word tables is taken as the result of the cancellation of an NVIVO training day and a tight submission deadline; this proves entirely possible since the research sample is comparatively small. Sensitive interpretation is essential to capture the nuances of some students' statements. For example, a code in 2009-2010 which annotates an extract of a complaint as *Being informed about the regulations* is not reflective of a student being told about the university's regulations but rather a confirmation by the student of their knowledge of the assessment regulations and using them to justify their appeal for a revised mark. This is noteworthy since few students' complaints indicate an awareness of the university's assessment regulations

#### Initial Coding

*Grounded Theory is a method to study process* (Charmaz, 2009, p.136). Charmaz highlights the importance of coding on an activity basis and to focus on what is actually happening. In support of this Saldana (2013) and Charmaz and Bryant (2011) advocate the use of gerunds

*...to help the researcher to define what is happening in the data identify the theoretical direction implicit or explicit in the code, and discern lines of an emerging story in the data* (p.303).

Gerunds are therefore applied where possible and code development is guided by Saldana's (2013) definition:

*A code in qualitative enquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.* (Saldana, 2013, p.3)

Coding as exemplified by the original proponents of GT is daunting; Strauss' (1987) handbook on analysis examples open coding in a hospital environment that appears over-analytical, focusing on the meaning of individual words alongside lengthy memoing. Strauss himself refers to this as *...fine-grained, microscopic coding ...* (p.63) and reflects on it again with Corbin in 1998, dedicating a chapter to *the microscopic examination of data*. This detail is not sustainable or relevant for the analysis of students' written texts. Students can struggle to articulate meaning and phrases can be repetitive. There is relief in finding Charmaz (2009) writing that Glaser later:

*...discarded the practice of line-by-line coding in favour of incident-by-incident coding because he believes line-by-line coding generates a jumble of unconnected codes.* (Charmaz, 2009, p.136)

Thereafter coding individual complaints is issues focused and encompasses the particular matters that students are raising as significant to their complaint; terminology is kept as close as possible to the student's statement and how it characterises their behaviour as a complainant.

Early coding of student correspondence is challenging. Reflection on the Initial Codes for

the first year of the data, 2006-2007, indicates that in some instances too many – or too few words – are employed in summarising what students are trying to convey. With others coding is not entirely accurate in capturing the student message. There is also danger that the overarching conceptual framework could influence too ambitious a thought process and lead to conclusions about the student perception of their relationship with the university that may not be emerging from the data. Noting Saldana's (2013) advice:

*Rarely will anyone get coding right the first time. Qualitative enquiry demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience.* (Saldana, 2013, p.10).

*Virtually all researcher-developed coding schemes are never fixed from the beginning – they evolve as analysis progresses.* (Saldana, 2013, p.29).

the initial coding of students' submissions is reviewed and the first run at coding becomes a useful pre-coding stage. Reflective amendments include a pre-code of *Not being happy with the 'fit to sit' approach*, originally allocated an Initial Code of *Challenging university policy*. On reflection, this is a step too far since the original student statement is about the university's extenuating circumstances policy that requires students to confirm if they are fit to take their assessments. This complaint is a challenge to university policy but the focus on the nature of the challenge needs to be clear in case dissatisfaction with the policy itself is to be significant. Thus the pre-code is revised to become an Initial Code of *Not being happy with the university's extenuating circumstances policy*.

Similarly, a pre-code of a student statement of staff *Not knowing the regulations* becomes an Initial Code of *Disadvantaged by academic staff ignorance of the regulations*. Here the student's point is less about staff not knowing the academic assessment rules and more about the adverse impact of not being able to find out what they need to know from academic staff.

Context is particularly important for an element of one student's complaint with an Initial Code of *Advising the university's failure to provide all support needed on a consistent basis*. Support within a university can be wide ranging including academic and welfare; the student is in fact disabled and the nature of the support required is specific. The revised Initial Code emphasises this: *Highlighting the university's failure to provide the disability support needed on a consistent basis*.

To support accuracy in eliciting the true meaning of the students' statements and to ensure clarity for the research audience, adjustments are made and data re-drawn up for all four academic years in the research data pool. The completion of the first stage coding presents both the early pre-code of the text and the final Initial Code. Initial Codes are given a reference using the relevant academic year, adding 'IC' to denote Initial Code and with a numerical allocation which runs consecutively. Where a code is replicated in any academic year, an alphabetical designator is added. Thus the first reference for the first code of the first student's written complaint is '67IC1'. This facilitates constant comparison and the identification of individual student's complaints as the coding stages and analysis progressed. An example of the Initial Coding for the academic year 2009-2010 is attached at Enclosure 1.

### ***Focused Coding***

At the second stage of analysis, focused coding, consideration is given to how the Initial Codes generated might form summary categories. Here the influence is Allan's (2003) application of GT to a commercial case study. As a GT researcher Allan does not support *micro-analysis* coding (p.2); instead he applies a referencing system to identify 'Key Points' of text that result in the generation of a written code. Key Points with a common theme are then grouped and regrouped in search of overarching concepts.



Allan's (2003) research determines Key Points from the original text and he ignores early coding. His approach is adapted for this case study such that the Initial Codes emerging from the students' written complaints are grouped under Key Points and the Key Points become critical to identifying Core Categories. Key Points are referenced consecutively from Key Point 1 (KP1), commencing with the first Key Point Code identified in the first year of the sample, 2006-2007. This further aids tracking to source data for later queries.

Key Points represent a summary category encompassing a group of Initial Codes. They are based on the wording of the Initial Codes themselves or an interpretation of the issue being raised by the Initial Codes. Thus:

- i. Initial Code 67IC19 *It's not my fault* becomes Key Point 17 *It's not my fault*: here retaining the In Vivo coding is important because of the student's absolute clarity that they have done nothing to contribute to the scenario they are in; the view that the individual has no responsibility for the position they are in is featured across academic years at the Initial Coding stage;
- ii. Initial Codes 67IC51/52/62 referring to the university's failure to provide information, or offer confusing messages, is encapsulated within Key Point 20 *Experiencing Poor Communications* and attracts a range of Initial Codes reflecting students' views of the difficulties in securing the right information at the right time;
- iii. Initial Code 67IC42 *Experiencing a hostile environment* one student's perception of the difficulties they face, gives rise to Key Point 16 *Encountering a hostile culture* which covers a range of Initial Codes detailing student perception of being harassed, victimised, being afraid to speak up and being given no sympathy;

- iv. Key Point 6 *Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice* requires careful thought to ensure it accurately describes some of the strong feelings expressed by students in a number of Initial Codes. The Theoretical Memorandum reflecting on this Key Point explains that terminology is considered carefully; ‘poor academic practice’ may have read better grammatically but as described by students the academic input is proactively bad not simply poor.

Identifying Key Points involves constant comparison between Initial Codes in each separate academic year, arriving at a Key Point framework for that particular year and then using the framework as the basis for the next academic year. Some Key Point codes are not relevant to some academic years; additional Key Points are added where previous Key Points are not relevant to the subject matter of an Initial Code; on occasion Initial Codes are moved to a later Key Point that subsequently appears more relevant. So there is constant review and movement across the data in the research sample. The Key Points develop from twenty-seven Key Point Codes in 2006-2007 to 50 Key Point Codes in the final year of the sample, 2009-2010; this is attached at Enclosure 2.

A summary of all Key Points with associated Initial Codes across all the years in the sample is drawn up. This results in a total of 551 Initial Codes expressing the key issues raised by the ninety-one student complainants in the sample; this is attached at Enclosure 3.

Finalising the full list of Key Points requires decisions about the primary Key Points forming the Core Categories that start to illuminate the concepts of student complaint behaviour. At this point ‘theoretical saturation’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) has been achieved on the basis that all Initial Codes had been allocated to Key Points and no new Key Points are generated.

### ***Defining Core Categories***

The third phase of analysis, 'Defining Core Categories', concerns the isolation of Core Categories from the Key Points identified and then defining the characteristics of these categories through the Conditional Relationship Guide used to support grounded theory studies by Wilson Scott (2004), Wilson Scott and Howell (2008) and Howell (2009). This supports conclusions regarding areas for further research via subsequent interviews.

In arriving at Core Categories, Saldana's (2013) warning that frequency is not a reliable criterion is noted; he refers to *summative power* (2013, p.227) as being critical, that is a category's ability to encapsulate a wide range of codes and sub-codes.

Reflecting on the data, it is noteworthy that issues promoted by students remain clustered around particular Key Points. As expressed by them this indicates some commonality of perceived experience. Although the number of Key Points (50) doubles across the sample, half of the Key Points (25) attracted zero or only one code in the last year of the sample 2009-2010; across the summary Key Points, 15 attract three or less Initial Codes. In some Key Points the Initial Codes themselves are repetitive. The isolation of Core Categories is almost a natural process due to the emerging evidence of student complaints being focused to common issues across all the academic years. However, to support the process reference is made to early memos recorded made at the pre-coding stage; some proving useful triggers. For example, a single line on the 2008-2009 initial coding spreadsheet:

*Students are passed around members of academic and support staff – there should be a policy of responsibility for decisions – students should not have to plague lots of staff for the right answer.*

Struck a chord with the Key Point *Tell me what to do* which attracts few Initial Codes but has potential summative power with a connecting theme of the student continually seeking help and resorting to formal complaint when this is not forthcoming. Again a 2008-2009 early reflection:

*Note the reaction of overseas students failing Masters' degrees – statements reveal shock at failure and cultural expectations of achievement – and shame of failure.*

*Why haven't students considered failure? The complainant knows the regulations and how they might be passed/failed but the reality of failure? Not a reality despite failing individual units and struggling with resits. What are their expectations of university life? However, perhaps this is not just an issue for overseas students? Is failure and the need to achieve academically not a reality for all students?*

influences the decision to retain Key Point 19: *Expecting a qualification by right ('The Deal')* as a Core Category of potential conceptual value. A noteworthy statement by Student 67C referring to *...vitriolic personal diatribes from the tutors* underpins the significance of Key Point 16: *Encountering a hostile culture*; this chimes with the subject areas of the emerging Core Categories and is held as a Core Category itself. As a result, the compilation of Core Categories based on the most frequently occurring Key Points does not mean an abandonment of the remaining Key Points; Key Points that are less frequent still hold relevance and are brought forward. The final eighteen individual Core Categories have thematic commonality and are grouped around three Conceptual Core Categories based on their summative power.

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

Student Ref	Student's written submission: early code	Code Ref	Initial Code
90A	<i>90A is a current student – data not within ethical clearance</i>		
90B	Feeling that faculty appeal has not received due consideration	90IC1	Feeling that the appeal has not received due consideration by the faculty
	Being informed about the regulations	90IC2	Knowing the regulations
	Not being treated 'equitably'	90IC3	Not being treated 'equitably'
	arguing that deferral means as if for the first time and all should be aggregated	90IC4	Challenging assessment regulations
	Insisting there has been an error	90IC5	Insisting there has been an error
	Being grateful for a review	90IC6	Being grateful for a review of the appeal
90C	<i>Student moved to 2008-2009</i>		
90D	Seeking an independent review	90IC16	Stating purpose of the submission is to obtain an independent review
	Refuting the faculty's response	90IC17	Challenging the faculty's response to the complaint
	Asserting there is a tutor error in marking	90IC170	Insisting the tutor has made an error in marking
	Explaining the submission in detail	90IC171	Explaining the assessment submission process in detail
	Complying with what was required	90IC172	Following university procedures
	Not being advised there was a problem until months later	90IC173	Expecting to be advised by the university of errors in the submission process
	Experiencing difficulty in contacting tutor	90IC18	Experiencing difficulty in contacting tutor
	Being shocked by final results	90IC19	Being shocked by final results
	Being first generation in HE	90IC20	Being first generation in HE
	Being a carer for a mentally ill parent	90IC21	being a carer for a mentally ill parent
	Wishing to discuss the issue with staff	90IC22	Wishing to discuss the complaint with staff

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

	Threatening to submit a complaint	90IC23	threatening to submit another complaint
	Being very stressed	90IC24	Being very stressed by the complaint incident
	Involving a third party (relative)	90IC25	Involving a third party (relative) in the complaint
90E	<i>Student moved to 2008-2009</i>	<i>OIA 2009-2010</i>	
90F	Acknowledging submission of an appeal relating to an incident over a year old	90IC33	Acknowledging submission relates to an old incident
	'I submitted my mitigating circumstances via my mother'	90IC34	'I submitted my mitigating circumstances via my mother'
	Not being informed of problem	90IC35	Receiving no information from the University regarding an unsuccessful EC submission
	Detailing a number of personal family problems including homelessness and broken family	90IC36	Detailing a number of personal family problems including homelessness and broken family
90G	Being unable to return to University to complete an assignment	90IC38	Being unable to return to University to complete an assignment due to extenuating circumstances matters
	Having to care for ill mother	90IC39	Having to care for ill mother
	Noting that cousin had been murder a few months previously	90IC40	Observing that cousin had been murdered a few months previously
	Having EC appeal rejected due to lack of evidence	90IC41	Noting with regret that an extenuating circumstances appeal was rejected due to lack of evidence
	Noting advice of SSNO that evidence of being a carer was needed	90IC42	Stating the advice of the SSNO that evidence of being a carer was needed
	Providing GP evidence	90IC43	Providing GP evidence

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

	Requesting a review of the faculty decision	90IC44	Requesting a review of the faculty decision
	Enjoying being at university.	90IC45	Making a point about enjoying being at university
90H	Being deeply depressed	90IC46	Being deeply depressed
	Suffering racial discrimination	90IC47	Suffering racial discrimination by academic tutor
	Being made mentally ill	90IC48	Being made mentally ill by attitude of tutor
	Being treated unfairly	90IC49	Being treated unfairly
	Being subject to personal pressure from academic that resulted in loss of interest in studies	90IC50	Losing interest in studies due to pressure from academic tutor
	Experiencing impact on health	90IC51	Suffering health problems as a result of discrimination
	Being subject to rudeness and lack of encouragement from tutor	90IC52	being subject to rudeness and lack of encouragement from tutor including being told to return home (Visa issues)
	Not wanting to waste money paid by family who are not rich	90IC53	Noting that failure means money is wasted in tuition fees by a family that is not rich
	Emphasising heavy workload completed to study and do resits	90IC54	Emphasising the heavy workload completed to study and do resits
	Noting that only one unit is failed with one mark	90IC55	Noting that only one unit is failed with one mark
	Poor performance being due to pressure and harassment	90IC56	Stating that poor performance is due to pressure and harassment
	Stressing attendance and commitment	90IC57	Stressing personal attendance and commitment
	Performance affected by rude behaviour and discriminatory behaviour of staff member	90IC58	Noting that academic performance has been affected by the rude and discriminatory behaviour of staff member
	Advising that another foreign student felt she was treated badly	90IC59	Advising that another foreign student felt she was treated badly
	Students being discouraged because they are Asian	90IC60	Stating that students were being discouraged because they are Asian

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

	Blaming tutor for failure due to discriminatory attitude	90IC61	Blaming tutor for failure due to discriminatory attitude
	Promoting personal achievements in other exams and colleges	90IC62	Promoting personal achievements in other colleges and exams
	Noting that it is not right to blame tutor due to respect he has been brought up to have for academics; but due to career and life impact it is necessary	90IC63	Noting that due to his upbringing the student believes it is not right to be disrespectful to an academic tutor but is now necessary due to the impact on career and life
	Hinting that international students will not want to study at the university	90IC64	Hinting that international students will not want to study at the university
	Being badly treated by faculty student support officer	90IC65	Being badly treated by faculty student support officer
	Emphasising adherence to rules and regulations and submitting on time	90IC66	emphasising adherence to rules and regulations and submitting on time
	Blaming incidence of plagiarism on academic tutor and lack of awareness	90IC67	Blaming an incidence of plagiarism on lack of awareness
	Passing everything except one unit which the tutor failed due to discrimination	90IC68	Passing everything except one unit which the tutor failed due to discrimination
	Being worried about the future for employment and children	90IC69	Being worried about the future for employment and children
	Asking Board to allow failed element to be resubmitted	90IC70	Asking the Assessment Board for a last chance to take a failed assessment
90I	Realising only one mark away from compensation	90IC71	Realising only one mark away from compensation
	Bringing appeal a year late as mark was provisional and hoped would change but no change in result and now too late to appeal to faculty	90IC72	Explaining rationale for a late appeal due to expectations of a marks change
	Believing that individual overseas students are treated differently	90IC73	Believing that individual (overseas) students are treated differently
	Not being treated fairly	90IC74	Being unfairly treated
	Advising that a PG Cert is of no value and no indicator of performance	90IC75	Not perceiving any value in achieving an exit award



## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

	Not being able to seek work in home country	90IC76	Stating that an exit award will impact on ability to secure work in home country
	Noting that this failure will dishonour family	90IC77	Stating that failure to achieve the final award will lead to family dishonour
	Noting that assessment regulations between postgraduate and undergraduate are not fair.	90IC78	Noting that assessment regulations between postgraduate and undergraduate are not fair
90J	Being polite and seeking help	90IC79	Being polite and seeking help
	Noting there has been an obvious mistake	90IC80	Advising that there has been an obvious mistake in the student's results profile
	Advising where a wrong mark has been posted	90IC81	Advising that an incorrect mark was released online
	Being concerned that a referred result should be a deferred result	90IC82	Querying a referred result which was an expected deferred result
	Advising that an assessment was a group effort and the group had done very well but unsure where mark has gone	90IC83	Advising that an assessment was a group effort and the group had done very well but unsure where mark has gone
	Being advised by faculty there is no error and resit work must be done Advising that academics should be asked to provide evidence of unit marks	90IC84	Refuting the accuracy of the University's marking process
	Being traumatised and frustrated and pleading for help	90IC85	Being traumatised and frustrated and pleading for help
90K	<i>90K is a current student – data not within ethical clearance</i>		
90L	Noting that assessment regulations between postgraduate and undergraduate are not fair	90IC88	Noting that assessment regulations between postgraduate and undergraduate are not fair
	Disagreeing with academic judgement	90IC89	Disagreeing with academic judgement

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

	Being angry about failure by tutor to view dissertation day before hand-in	90IC90	Being angry about failure by tutor to view dissertation day before hand-in
	Feeling greatly annoyed by effort of getting music in to the industry and then getting few marks	90IC91	Feeling greatly annoyed by getting music recognised in the music industry but not awarded many marks by academics
	Providing evidence of external validation of the quality of the work	90IC92	Providing evidence of external validation of the quality of the work
	Considering the University is failing to recognise standard of work in marking	90IC93	Considering the University is failing to recognise standard of work in marking
	Comparing marks with another student who is 'know where near as academically intelligent' and gets within 2 marks'	90IC94	Comparing marks with another student who is 'know where near as academically intelligent' but gets a similar mark
	Complaining about double marking methodology	90IC95	Complaining about double marking methodology
	Giving examples of 'definite injustice' in the marking system	90IC96	Giving examples of 'definite injustice' in the marking system
	Being given poor advice by academic supervisor	90IC97	Being given poor advice by academic supervisor
	Getting poor value for money	90IC98	Getting poor value for money
	Believing that getting little teaching warrants a remark	90IC99	Believing that because there has been little teaching required there is justification for a re-marking of the work
	Feeling something is suspect	90IC100	Feeling something is suspect
	Feeling whole amazing experience at university now ruined	90IC101	Feeling that whole amazing experience at university has been ruined by low marking
	Seeing little value in complaining if nothing happens	90IC102	Seeing little value in complaining if work is not going to be re-marked
	Stating that career and masters opportunities now ruined	90IC103	Stating that career and masters opportunities are ruined because of borderline mark and failure to achieve higher classification (2.1)
90M	Explaining ongoing health issues as a result an RTA	90IC104	Explaining all ongoing health issues resulting from

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

			a serious road traffic accident
	Explaining challenges of physically being able to get in to university	90IC105	Explaining the physical challenges involved in getting in to university
	Recognising that should not have returned to university until fully fit	90IC106	Recognising that there should have been no return to university until fully fit
	Requesting a return to studies with repeat year	90IC107	Requesting a return to studies with repeat year
90N	Advising that the academic tutor considered work to be of a 2.1 standard	90IC108	Advising that the academic tutor considered work to be of a 2.1 standard
	Advised to seek EC	90IC109	Noting advice to seek extenuating circumstances
	Not accepting that medical evidence submitted is not appropriate	90IC110	Not accepting that medical evidence submitted is not appropriate
	Challenging the expectation that a student would be aware of a policy change	90IC111	Challenging the expectation that a student would be aware of a policy change
	Blaming the Student Support Network Officer for not advising of a new policy	90IC112	Blaming the Student Support Network Officer for not advising of a new policy
	Promoting personal success in winning an award on course	90IC113	Promoting personal success in winning an award on course
	Feeling misled by the University	90IC114	Feeling misled by the University
	Feeling the University has been unfair	90IC115	Feeling the University has been unfair
90O	Being unable to sit first and second attempts due to illness and awaiting outcome of EC application	90IC116	Being unable to sit first and second attempts due to illness and awaiting outcome of extenuating circumstances application
	Not being able to afford resit fees	90IC117	Being unable to afford resit fees
	Having evidence IT systems were faulty	90IC118	Having evidence of failure of university IT systems
	Getting no help from duty academic over summer period	90IC119	Receiving no help from duty academic staff over summer period
	Noting that information on the VLE was removed early	90IC120	Noting that information on the student VLE was

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

			removed early and not available
	Unemployed and accruing heavy tuition fees	90IC121	Being unemployed and struggling to meet heavy tuition fees
	Suffering extensive stress	90IC122	Suffering extensive stress (complaint)
	Advising that a large institution should put students in this position	90IC123	Advising that the University should not be placing students in this stressful situation
	Due to economic climate the degree and job opportunity it affords is critical	90IC124	Stressing that due to the economic climate a good degree is critical for job opportunities.
90P	Being one mark from passing an exam and working out the hours of additional study time to continue	90IC125	Being one mark from passing an exam and working out the hours of additional study time to continue
	Being unable to proceed to the next year due to referrals advising that decision is unfair and unreasonable	90IC126	Being unable to proceed to the next year due to referrals advising that decision is unfair and unreasonable
	Being penalised for past mistakes	90IC127	Considering the outcome as a penalty for past mistakes
	Confirming ability to do extra work alongside the new level	90IC128	Confirming belief in ability to undertake referrals and progress
	Advising that not progressing would be demotivating and challenging due to dyslexia	90IC129	Advising that not progressing to the next academic year would be demotivating and challenging due to dyslexia
	Stating the implications for further debt	90IC130	Expressing concern about incurring further debt as a result of not progressing
	Advising of discussions with father and faculty staff	90IC131	Reminding the University of discussions with parent
	Recognising own failures in not asking for help	90IC132	Recognising own failure in not asking for help at the time
	Asking to be treated exceptionally	90IC133	Asking to be treated exceptionally

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

90Q	Feeling passionate about grounds for appeal	90IC134	Feeling passionate about grounds for appeal (extenuating circumstances)
	Enclosing email exchanges with faculty as evidence of appeal issues	90IC135	Enclosing email exchanges with faculty as evidence of appeal issues
	Believing appeals process does not adequately recognise extenuating circumstances	90IC136	Stating that appeals process does not adequately recognise extenuating circumstances
	Confirming wanted to hand in work rather than claim EC for all effort that resulted in losing fiancée would be wasted	90IC137	Confirming intention to hand in work rather than claim extenuating circumstances or all effort and impact on lifestyle would be a waste
	Accepting was not in a fit state to submit	90IC138	Admitting wrong decision – was not in a fit state to submit or make a reasoned decision
90R	Submitting a polite appeal	90IC139	Submitting a polite appeal
	Appreciating the work done at faculty level responding to the query	90IC140	Appreciating the work done by faculty staff in responding to the query level complaint
	Having trouble getting academic support over the summer	90IC141	Having trouble getting help from academic tutors over summer
	Not being advised of need to retake a second piece of work	90IC142	Not being advised of need to retake a second piece of work
	Not wishing to regret studying at the University or paying so much money	90IC143	Not wishing to regret studying at the University or paying so much money
90S	Explaining that work was submitted and marks returned with no advice that the work was late	90IC144	Explaining that assessment was submitted and marks returned without any indication the work was late and would receive a penalty mark of zero
	Explaining that work could not be printed but that staff agreed to read the USB direct	90IC145	Explaining that work could not be printed following submission but that academic staff agreed to read the USB direct

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

	Believing that work must have been lost	90IC146	Believing that work must have been lost and there must be a mark somewhere
	Stating unfairness of not being allowed to progress to the next year	90IC147	Stating the unfairness of not being allowed to progress to the next year
	Advising a recent abortion	90IC148	Advising of a recent abortion as a secondary issue
90T	Noting that an unsuccessful appeal was submitted due to submission of corrupt data	90IC149	Noting that an unsuccessful appeal was submitted due to submission of corrupt data
	Confirming that the submission was in the required format	90IC150	Confirming that the assessment submission was in the required format
	Being totally unsatisfied with faculty appeal outcome	90IC151	Being totally unsatisfied with the faculty query stage outcome
	Working very hard for 3 years	90IC152	Working very hard for 3 years
	Not being able to afford another year's study	90IC153	Not being able to afford another year's study
	Confirming work is prepared in different formats and being sure it could be viewed	90IC154	Confirming work is prepared in different formats and being sure it can be viewed
	Being undeserving of an unclassified degree	90IC155	Being worth more than an Unclassified degree
	Requesting another chance to submit the work	90IC156	Requesting another (exceptional) opportunity to submit the assessment
90U	Noting that all final level work has been sent to faculty to evidence standard of work	90IC157	Advising that all final level work has been sent to faculty to evidence standard of work
	Noting that assessment board did not raise classification despite evidence of impact on marks	90IC158	Noting that the assessment board did not raise the classification despite evidence of impact on marks
	Claiming evidence of exceptional circumstances	90IC159	Claiming evidence of exceptional circumstances
	Considering the awards system to be rigid	90IC160	Considering the classification system to be rigid

## Enclosure 1 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: INITIAL CODING

	Giving an example of the university changing the rules when it wants	90IC161	Providing an example of the university changing the rules when it wants (changing assessment regulations)
	Disagreeing with statements in the faculty level complaint	90IC162	Disagreeing with statements in the faculty level complaint
	Not accepting that issues can be out of time because the university must accept where there is bad practice	90IC163	Asserting that issues cannot be out of time – the university must accept where there is bad practice
	Providing further examples of where students were misled on assessments	90IC164	Providing further examples of where students were misled on assessments
	Claiming that the university does not want to learn about issues from students	90IC165	Claiming that the university does not want to learn about issues from students
	Noting that university policies and procedures can be complicated for students to read	90IC166	Noting that university policies and procedures can be complicated for students to read
	Commenting that students at final level are reliant on being given information (my course / tutors responding) – too much confusion around assessments for students to act independently	90IC167	Commenting that students at final level still rely on being given information (e.g. via my course/tutors responding); there is too much confusion around assessments for students to act independently
	Advising that parents will want to get involved	90IC168	Advising that parents will want to get involved
	Noting that attending university is a big investment	90IC169	Noting that attending university if a bit investment

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

Key Point Ref.	Key Point Code	Initial Code Ref.	Initial Code
KP1	<i>Being disadvantaged as an International Student</i>	90IC47	Suffering racial discrimination by academic tutor
		90IC48	Being made mentally ill by attitude of tutor
		90IC49	Being treated unfairly
		90IC50	Losing interest in studies due to pressure from academic tutor
		90IC51	Suffering health problems as a result of discrimination
		90IC52	being subject to rudeness and lack of encouragement from tutor including being told to return home (Visa issues)
		90IC64	Hinting that international students will not want to study at the university
		90IC59	Advising that another foreign student felt she was treated badly
		90IC60	Stating that students were being discouraged because they are Asian
		90IC73	Believing that individual (overseas) students are treated differently
KP2	<i>Submitting a deferential complaint</i>	90IC6	Being grateful for a review of the appeal
		90IC33	Acknowledging complaint submission relates to an old incident
		90IC45	Making a point about enjoying being at university
		90IC63	Noting that due to his upbringing the student believes it is not right to be disrespectful to an academic tutor but it has become necessary due to the impact on career and
		90IC79	Being polite and seeking help
		90IC139	Submitting a polite appeal
		90IC140	Appreciating the work done by faculty staff in responding to the query level complaint



## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

KP3	<i>Experiencing an extenuating circumstance</i>	90IC21	being a carer for a mentally ill parent
		90IC38	Being unable to return to University to complete an assignment due to extenuating circumstances matters
		90IC39	Having to care for ill mother
		90IC104	Explaining all ongoing health issues resulting from a serious road traffic accident
		90IC105	Explaining the physical challenges involved in getting in to university
		90IC116	Being unable to sit first and second attempts due to illness and awaiting outcome of extenuating circumstances application
		90IC134	Feeling passionate about grounds for appeal (extenuating circumstances)
		90IC159	Claiming evidence of exceptional circumstances
KP4	<i>Confirming adherence to University procedures</i>	90IC41	Noting with regret that an EC appeal was rejected due to lack of evidence
		90IC42	Stating the advice of the Student Support Network Officer that evidence of being a carer was needed
		90IC43	Providing GP evidence
		90IC66	Emphasising adherence to rules and regulations and submitting on time
		90IC109	Noting advice to seek Extenuating Circumstances
		90IC135	Enclosing email exchanges with faculty as evidence of appeal issues
		90IC154	Confirming work is prepared in different formats and being sure it can be viewed
		90IC171	Explaining the assessment submission process in detail
		90IC172	Following University procedures
KP5	<i>Expressing dissatisfaction with the complaint process</i>	90IC1	Feeling that the appeal has not received due consideration by the faculty

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

		90IC17	Challenging the faculty's response to the complaint
		90IC44	Requesting a review of the faculty decision
		90IC102	Seeing little value in complaining if work is not going to be re-marked
		90IC136	Stating that appeals process does not adequately recognise extenuating circumstances
		90IC149	Noting that an unsuccessful appeal was submitted due to submission of corrupt data
		90IC151	Being totally unsatisfied with the faculty query stage outcome
		90IC162	Disagreeing with statements in the faculty level complaint
		90IC165	Claiming that the university does not want to learn about issues from students
		90IC163	Asserting that issues cannot be out of time – the university must accept where there is bad practice
KP6	<i>Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice</i>	90IC18	Experiencing difficulty in contacting tutor
		90IC90	Being angry about failure by tutor to view dissertation day before hand
		90IC97	Being given poor advice by academic supervisor
		90IC119	Receiving no help from duty academic staff over summer period
		90IC141	Having trouble getting help from academic tutors over summer
KP7	<i>Being subject to unfair treatment</i>	90IC3	Not being treated 'equitably'
		90IC19	Being shocked by final results
		90IC74	Being unfairly treated
		90IC78	Noting that assessment regulations between postgraduate and undergraduate are not fair
		90IC88	Noting that assessment regulations between postgraduate and undergraduate are not fair

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

		90IC115	Feeling the University has been unfair
		90IC126	Being unable to proceed to the next year due to referrals advising that decision is unfair and unreasonable
		90IC147	Stating the unfairness of not being allowed to progress to the next year
		90IC150	Confirming that the assessment submission was in the required format
KP8	<i>Making effort to study whilst ill</i>		
KP9	<i>Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail</i>	90IC36	Detailing a number of personal family problems including homelessness and broken family
		90IC40	Observing that cousin had been murdered a few months previously
		90IC148	Advising of a recent abortion as a secondary issue
KP10	<i>Involving a Third Party</i>	90IC25	Involving a third party (relative) in the complaint
		90IC34	'I submitted my mitigating circumstances via my mother'
		90IC131	Reminding the University of discussions with parent
		90IC168	Advising that parents will want to get involved
KP11	<i>Expecting special treatment</i>	90IC70	Asking the Assessment Board for a last chance to take a failed assessment
		90IC55	Noting that only one unit is failed with one mark
		90IC107	Requesting a return to studies with repeat year
		90IC133	Asking to be treated exceptionally

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

KP12	<i>Having future plans jeopardised</i>		
KP13	<i>Having no choice</i>		
KP14	<i>Having financial problems</i>	90IC53	Noting that failure means money is wasted in tuition fees by a family that is not rich
		90IC117	Being unable to afford resit fees
		90IC121	Being unemployed and struggling to meet heavy tuition fees
		90IC130	Expressing concern about incurring further debt as a result of not progressing
		90IC153	Not being able to afford another year's study
KP15	<i>Experiencing mental health problems</i>	90IC46	Being deeply depressed
		90IC85	Being traumatised and frustrated and pleading for help
		90IC122	Suffering extensive stress (complaint)
KP16	<i>Encountering a hostile culture</i>	90IC65	Being badly treated by faculty student support officer
		90IC68	Passing everything except one unit which the tutor failed due to discrimination
		90IC61	Blaming tutor for failure due to discriminatory attitude
		90IC56	Stating that poor performance is due to pressure and harassment
		90IC58	Noting that academic performance has been affected by the rude and discriminatory behaviour of staff member

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

		90IC156	Requesting another (exceptional) opportunity to submit the assessment
KP17	<i>"It's not my fault"</i>		
KP18	<i>Coping with a bereavement</i>		
KP19	<i>Expecting a qualification by right ('The Deal')</i>		
KP20	<i>Experiencing poor communications</i>	90IC23	Threatening to submit another complaint
		90IC24	Being very stressed by the complaint incident
		90IC35	Receiving no information from the University regarding an unsuccessful EC submission
		90IC67	Blaming an incidence of plagiarism on lack of awareness
		90IC112	Blaming the Student Support Network Officer for not advising of a new policy
		90IC142	Not being advised of need to retake a second piece of work
		90IC144	Explaining that assessment was submitted and marks returned without any indication the work was late and would receive a penalty mark of zero
		90IC166	Noting that university policies and procedures can be complicated for students to read
		90IC167	Commenting that students at final level still rely on being given information (e.g. Via my course/tutors responding); there is too much confusion around assessments for students to act independently
		90IC164	Providing further examples of where students were misled on assessments

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

KP21	<i>Challenging the University</i>	90IC4	Challenging assessment regulations
		90IC5	Insisting there has been an error
		90IC16	Stating purpose of the submission is to obtain an independent review
		90IC72	Explaining rationale for a late appeal due to expectations of a marks change
		90IC96	Giving examples of 'definite injustice' in the marking system
		90IC100	Feeling something is suspect
		90IC108	Advising that the academic tutor considered work to be of a 2.1 standard
		90IC110	Not accepting that medical evidence submitted is not appropriate
		90IC111	Challenging the expectation that a student would be aware of a policy change
		90IC135	Enclosing email exchanges with faculty as evidence of appeal issues
		90IC145	Explaining that work could not be printed following submission but that academic staff agreed to read the USB direct
		90IC146	Believing that work must have been lost and there must be a mark somewhere
		90IC157	Advising that all final level work has been sent to the faculty to evidence standard of student's work
		90IC158	Noting that the assessment board did not raise the classification despite evidence of impact on marks
		90IC170	Insisting the tutor has made an error in marking
KP22	<i>Deserving better outcomes</i>	90IC71	Realising only one mark away from compensation
		90IC75	Not perceiving any value in achieving an exit award

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

		90IC91	Feeling greatly annoyed by getting music recognised in the music industry but not awarded many marks by academics
		90IC92	Providing evidence of external validation of the quality of the work
		90IC93	Considering the University is failing to recognise standard of work in marking
		90IC94	Comparing marks with another student who is 'know where near as academically intelligent' but gets a similar mark
		90IC107	requesting a return to studies with repeat year
		90IC113	Promoting personal success in winning an award on course
		90IC155	Being worth more than an unclassified degree
KP23	<i>Wishing to discuss complaint</i>	90IC22	Wishing to discuss the complaint with staff
KP24	<i>Not getting value for money</i>	90IC98	Getting poor value for money
		90IC99	Believing that because there has been little teaching required there is justification for a re-marking of the work
		90IC169	Noting that attending university if a bit investment
KP25	<i>Damaging employment prospects</i>	90IC69	Being worried about the future for employment and children
		90IC76	Stating that an exit will impact on ability to secure work in home country
		90IC103	Stating that career and masters opportunities are ruined because of

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

			borderline mark and failure to achieve higher classification (2.1)
		90IC124	Stressing that due to the economic climate a good degree is critical for job opportunities.
KP26	<i>Being given incorrect advice</i>		
KP27	<i>Experiencing administrative errors</i>	90IC80	Advising that there has been an obvious mistake in the student's results profile
		90IC81	Advising that an incorrect mark was released online
		90IC82	Querying a referred result which was an expected deferred results
		90IC83	Advising that an assessment was a group effort and the group had done very well but unsure where mark has gone
KP28	<i>'Tell me what to do'!</i>	90IC173	Expecting to be advised by the University of errors in the submission process
KP29	<i>Failing to understand assessment requirements</i>		
KP30	<i>Experiencing a failure in duty of care</i>	90IC123	Advising that the University should not be placing students in this stressful situation
KP31	<i>Being confused by regulations</i>		
KP32	<i>Suffering a disproportionate penalty</i>	90IC127	Considering the outcome as a penalty for past mistakes
KP33	<i>Being disadvantaged by a disability</i>	90IC129	Advising that not progressing to the next academic year would be



## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

			demotivating and challenging due to dyslexia
KP34	<i>Raising multiple complaint issues</i>		
KP35	<i>Receiving no family support</i>		
KP36	<i>Promoting personal effort</i>	90IC20	Being first generation in HE
		90IC54	Emphasising the heavy workload completed to study and do resits
		90IC57	Stressing personal attendance and commitment
		90IC62	Promoting personal achievements in other colleges and exams
		90IC128	Confirming belief in ability to undertake referrals and progress
		90IC152	Working very hard for 3 years
KP37	<i>Being let down by the university</i>	90IC101	Feeling that whole amazing experience at university has been ruined by low marking
		90IC114	Feeling misled by the University
		90IC143	Not wishing to regret studying at the University or paying so much money
KP38	<i>Not being able to control things that are going wrong</i>		
KP39	<i>Being a better person for studying the course</i>		

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

KP40	<i>Accusing another student personally</i>		
KP41	<i>Researching the regulations</i>	90IC2	Knowing the regulations
		90IC125	Being one mark from passing an exam and working out the hours of additional study time to continue
		90IC137	Confirming intention to hand in work rather than claim EC or all effort and impact on lifestyle would be a waste
KP42	<i>Being disadvantaged by University policy</i>		
KP43	<i>Needing closure</i>		
KP44	<i>Accepting responsibility</i>	90IC106	Recognising that there should have been no return to university until fully fit
		90IC132	Recognising own failure in not asking for help at the time
		90IC138	Admitting wrong decision – was not in a fit state to submit or make a reasoned decision
KP45	<i>Not aligning with University policy and procedures</i>		
KP46	<i>Feeling under pressure</i>		
KP47	<i>Not wanting to let people down</i>	90IC77	Stating that failure to achieve the final award will lead to family dishonour

## Enclosure 2 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2009 – 2010: KEY POINT CODING

KP48	<i>Not being able to contact an academic tutor</i>		
KP49	<i>Challenging Academic Standards</i>	90IC84	Refuting the accuracy of the University's marking process
		90IC89	Disagreeing with academic judgement
		90IC95	Complaining about double marking methodology
		90IC160	Considering the classification system to be rigid
		90IC161	Providing an example of the university changing the rules when it wants (changing assessment regulations)
KP50	<i>Experiencing a failure of University services</i>	90IC118	Having evidence of failure of university IT systems
		90IC120	Noting that information on the student VLE was removed early and not available

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

Key Point Ref.	Key Point Code	Initial Code Ref.	Initial Code
KP1	<i>Being disadvantaged as an International Student</i>	67IC1	Being foreign
		67IC1A	Being foreign
		67IC48	Impacted by cultural expectations
		78IC58	Being disadvantaged by being foreign
		78IC58A	Being disadvantaged by being foreign
		89IC25	experiencing cultural issues that prevented earlier disclosure of extenuating circumstances issues
		89IC34	Experiencing problems as an overseas student (plagiarism)
		89IC35	Being disadvantaged by missing international induction programmes
		89IC46	Being affected by cultural practices (lengthy grieving customs)
		89IC54	Stressing the challenges of getting evidence due to death in Nigeria
		89IC135	Feeling that as a foreign student a fail mark is not fair
		89IC131	Feeling that additional help is needed for foreign students as they have paid heavier fees and made sacrifices to come to a new country
		89IC143	Being impacted by need to be overseas to support family
		89IC145	Not being able to afford overseas fees at other universities to continue studies
		90IC47	Suffering racial discrimination by academic tutor
		90IC48	Being made mentally ill by attitude of tutor
		90IC49	Being treated unfairly
		90IC50	Losing interest in studies due to pressure from academic tutor
		90IC51	Suffering health problems as a result of discrimination
		90IC52	Being subject to rudeness and lack of encouragement from tutor including being told to return home (Visa issues)

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		90IC64	Hinting that international students will not want to study at the university
		90IC59	Advising that another foreign student felt she was treated badly
		90IC60	Stating that students were being discouraged because they are Asian
		90IC73	Believing that individual (overseas) students are treated differently
KP2	<i>Submitting a deferential complaint</i>	67IC2	Pleading
		67IC46	Asking for help
		67IC6A	Being familiar
		67IC46A	Asking for help
		67IC46B	Asking for help
		78IC9	Appreciating personal academic weaknesses
		78IC33	Submitting a deferential complaint
		78IC56	Taking a deferential stance
		89IC31	Being very positive about the first year experience
		89IC33	Submitting a deferential complaint
		89IC39	Requesting a review of the decision with 'human compassion'
		89IC55	'Pleading my case'
		89IC67	'My whole future is on the line'
		89IC120	Expecting a favourable response
		89IC132	Making favourable comments about peers students and academics in previous academic years
		89IC121	Being formal(dear sir/madam)
		89IC160	Taking a deferential stance in opening (international student)
		90IC6	Being grateful for a review of the appeal
		90IC33	Acknowledging complaint submission relates to an old incident
		90IC45	Making a point about enjoying being at university
		90IC63	Noting that due to upbringing the student believes it is not right to be disrespectful to an academic tutor but it has become necessary due to the impact on career
		90IC79	Being polite and seeking help
		90IC139	Submitting a polite appeal
		90IC140	Appreciating the work done by

**STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING**

			faculty staff in responding to the query level complaint
KP3	<i>Experiencing an extenuating circumstance</i>	67IC3	Being pregnant
		67IC15	Being ill
		67IC20	Experiencing illness (temporary)
		67IC20A	Experiencing illness
		67IC45	Being ill: serious illness
		67IC23	Making efforts to study when ill
		67IC45A	Being ill: serious illness
		67IC3A	Being Pregnant
		67IC56	Experiencing multiple serious personal circumstances
		67IC20B	Experiencing illness (temporary)
		67IC55A	Failing to appreciate the need for help on illness
		67IC55	Failing to appreciate need for help
		78IC22	Experiencing extenuating circumstances
		78IC63	Suffering illness (serious)
		78IC22A	Being unable to attend class due to EC issues
		89IC1	Experiencing undisclosed extenuating circumstances affecting ability to achieve a 2.1
		89IC48	Appealing to the extenuating circumstances panel
		89IC140	Experiencing multiple extenuating circumstances
		89IC141	Being affected by mother's death
		89IC142	Required to take care of family as eldest son
		89IC144	Being required to support family business
		89IC53	Explaining why evidence for extenuating circumstances submission was not available to present at time of exams
		89IC167	Noting positive start with full engagement but encountering external 'unavoidable difficulties'
		89IC168	Detailing dramatic personal event that led to a sleeping disorder
		89IC169	Noting increased stress with death of grandmother
		89IC170	Detailing subsequent death of grandfather and aunt

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		89IC171	Unable to perform to 'full potential' due to 'an emotionally difficult year'
		89IC71	Indicating range of family problems but not wishing to use a 'sob story'
		89IC90	Detailing personal health problems during the periods of assessment
		89IC91	Evidencing medical confirmation that student could not have been well enough to be assessed
		89IC109	Resubmitting old extenuating circumstances submission with new evidence
		89IC128	Providing evidence for a range of detailed health problems
		89IC140	Detailing all personal circumstances as mitigation
		89IC163	Detailing an injury that prevented submission of evidence
		89IC165	Affirming inability to respond to prior requests for information due to injury
		89IC179	Feeling under pressure due to supporting the university tennis team to league win and promotion
		90IC21	Being a carer for a mentally ill parent
		90IC38	Being unable to return to university to complete an assignment due to extenuating circumstances matters
		90IC39	Having to care for ill mother
		90IC104	Explaining all ongoing health issues resulting from a serious road traffic accident
		90IC105	Explaining the physical challenges involved in getting in to university
		90IC116	Being unable to sit first and second attempts due to illness and awaiting outcome of extenuating circumstances application
		90IC134	Feeling passionate about grounds for appeal (extenuating circumstances)
		90IC159	Claiming evidence of exceptional circumstances
KP4	<i>Confirming adherence to university procedures</i>	67IC4	Adhering to formal procedure
		67IC28	Adhering to procedures

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		67IC28A	Adhering to procedures
		67IC44	Assuring availability of evidence
		67IC28B	Adhering to procedures
		78IC15	Adhering to university procedures
		78IC31	Adhering to academic staff advice
		78IC82	Adhering to advice from academic tutor
		78IC31A	Adhering to academic staff advice
		78IC31B	Adhering to academic staff advice
		78IC31C	Adhering to academic staff advice
		89IC172	Detailing all subjects to be deferred
		89IC173	Requesting review of prior year results due to university failure to provide prompt information
		89IC174	Listing all evidence to follow
		89IC93	Following procedures exactly as advised
		89IC148	Being explicit about grounds for appeal against the appeal procedures
		89IC149	being clear about following procedures
		89IC150	Being specific about dates of incidents and documents and quoting university guidance
		89IC155	checking and commenting on original documentation received about APL process
		89IC164	Listing all evidence now being submitted with appeal
		90IC11	Following university procedures
		90IC41	Noting with regret that an extenuating circumstances appeal was rejected due to lack of evidence
		90IC42	Stating the advice of the Student Support Network Officer that evidence of being a carer was needed
		90IC43	Providing GP evidence
		90IC66	Emphasising adherence to rules and regulations and submitting on time
		90IC109	Noting advice to seek Extenuating Circumstances
		90IC135	Enclosing email exchanges with faculty as evidence of appeal issues
		90IC154	Confirming work is prepared in different formats and being sure it can be viewed



## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		90IC171	Explaining the assessment submission process in some detail
		90IC172	Following university procedures
KP5	<i>Expressing dissatisfaction with the complaint process</i>	67IC7	Experiencing a poor complaint review by university staff
		67IC5	Requiring a satisfactory academic result
		67IC7A	Experiencing a poor complaint review by university staff
		67IC7B	Experiencing a poor complaint review by university staff
		67IC7C	Experiencing a poor complaint review by university staff
		78IC86	Challenging the faculty's complaint process
		78IC95	Not wanting to 'rock the boat' by challenging feedback
		78IC96	Feeling that challenging tutor might result in things 'going against me'
		89IC86	Wanting a speedy review
		89IC154	refuting statements made in the faculty response
		89IC161	Noting lack of faculty support for complaint
		90IC1	Feeling that the appeal has not received due consideration by the faculty
		90IC17	Challenging the faculty's response to the complaint
		90IC44	Requesting a review of the faculty decision
		90IC102	Seeing little value in complaining if work is not going to be re-marked
		90IC136	Stating that appeals process does not adequately recognise extenuating circumstances
		90IC149	Noting that an unsuccessful appeal was submitted due to submission of corrupt data
		90IC151	Being totally unsatisfied with the faculty query stage outcome
		90IC162	Disagreeing with statements in the faculty level complaint
		90IC165	Claiming that the university does not want to learn about issues from students

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		90IC163	Asserting that issues cannot be out of time – the university must accept where there is bad practice
KP6	<i>Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice</i>	67IC8	Being subject to prejudiced marking
		67IC9	Experiencing academic unavailability
		67IC10	Subject to poor teaching
		67IC11	Evidencing academic favouritism
		67IC12	Subject to poor marking practice
		67IC13	Being subject to academic rudeness
		67IC25	Being disadvantaged by academic staff ignorance of regulations
		67IC43	Experiencing unreasonable academic behaviour
		67IC9A	Experiencing academic unavailability
		67IC53	Receiving no formal feedback
		67IC25A	Being disadvantaged by academic staff ignorance of regulations
		67IC59	Suspecting a conspiratorial approach by university staff
		67IC9B	Experiencing Academic unavailability
		78IC37	Receiving no formal feedback
		78IC37A	Receiving no formal feedback
		78IC39	Blaming the university for poor academic performance
		78IC70	Being disadvantaged by an academic staff error
		78IC61	Being subject to poor academic supervision
		78IC77	Subject to poor marking practice
		78IC48	Being ignored by tutors
		78IC61A	Being subject to poor academic supervision
		78IC93	Expecting a higher grade as a result of supervisor feedback
		78IC98	Not receiving promised individual tutorials
		89IC22	Being given the wrong guidance about unit assessment by academic tutor
		89IC61	Accusing the 'teacher' of openly discriminatory practice

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		89IC62	Accusing staff of collaboration
		89IC71	Being given poor advice about regulations by academic (can fail a module and get a degree)
		89IC74	Not being prepared for dissertation or consequences of failing
		89IC97	Experiencing difficulties contacting the unit tutor who was often unavailable
		89IC98	Stressing that any fault is with the unit tutor who failed to respond to communications to provide information
		89IC129	Receiving no help with assessment from academic staff
		89IC130	Complaining about unsupportive comments from academic tutors
		89IC178	Being given poor advice about regulations by academic (can fail a module and get degree)
		89IC181	Not being prepared for dissertation or of consequences of failing
		90IC18	Experiencing difficulty in contacting tutor
		90IC141	Having trouble getting help from academic tutors over summer
		90IC90	Being angry about failure by tutor to view dissertation day before hand
		90IC97	Being given poor advice by academic supervisor
		90IC119	Receiving no help from duty academic staff over summer period
KP7	<i>Being subject to unfair treatment</i>	67IC32B	Being subject to unfair treatment
		67IC32C	Being subject to unfair treatment
		67IC32A	Being subject to unfair treatment
		67IC32	Being subject to unfair treatment
		78IC2	Being subject to an unfair decision
		78IC8	Receiving a disproportionate penalty
		78IC13	Being adversely impacted by a faculty decision
		78IC14	Experiencing an unfair situation
		78IC87	Being unfairly treated
		78IC2A	Being subject to an unfair decision
		78IC100	Being subject to 'a grave injustice'
		90IC3	Not being treated 'equitably'
		90IC19	Being shocked by final results

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		90IC74	Being unfairly treated
		90IC78	Noting that assessment regulations between postgraduate and undergraduate are not fair
		90IC88	Noting that assessment regulations between postgraduate and undergraduate are not fair
		90IC115	Feeling the University has been unfair
		90IC126	Being unable to proceed to the next year due to referrals advising that decision is unfair and unreasonable
		90IC147	Stating the unfairness of not being allowed to progress to the next year
		90IC150	Confirming that the assessment submission was in the required format
KP8	<i>Making effort to study whilst ill</i>	67IC23	Making efforts to study when ill
			<b>No codes 2007-2008</b>
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP9	<i>Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail</i>	67IC26	Detailing all aspects of illness
		67IC54	Disclosing detailed private circumstances
		67IC55A	Disclosing detailed private circumstances
		67IC54A	Disclosing detailed private circumstances
		67IC22	Detailing historical problems
		78IC65	Disclosing detailed private circumstances
		89IC8	Disclosing detailed private circumstances
		89IC24	Detailing additional very personal matters
		89IC47	Detailing a lot of very personal and emotional issues
		89IC51	Advising of the problems of dealing with seven children
		89IC78	Detailing a lot of personal circumstances (extenuating circumstances) that account for the

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

			student's error
		89IC110	Detailing personal illness and associated error by GP
		90IC36	Detailing a number of personal family problems including homelessness and broken family
		90IC40	Observing that cousin had been murdered a few months previously
		90IC148	Advising of a recent abortion as a secondary issue
KP10	<i>Involving a Third Party</i>	67IC27A	Threatening to involve a third party
		67IC27	Threatening to involve a third party
		67IC37	Involving third parties (non-threatening approach)
		67IC39	Involving a third party (threatening approach)
		67IC39A	Involving a third party (threatening approach)
		78IC20	Involving a third party (non-threatening)
		78IC20A	Involving a third party (non-threatening)
		78IC42	Involving a third party
		78IC42A	Involving a third party
		78IC73	Quoting a third party
		78IC20B	Involving a third party (non-threatening)
		89IC43	Receiving lots of support from staff and students
		89IC94	Authorising a parent to handle the appeal
		78IC24B	Involving a third party (work assessment)
		89IC107	Highlighting the support given by academic staff for the appeal
		89IC128	Providing evidence for a range of detailed health problems
		90IC34	'I submitted my mitigating circumstances via my mother'
		90IC131	Reminding the University of discussions with parent
		90IC168	Advising that parents will want to get involved
KP11	<i>Expecting special treatment</i>	67IC29	Expecting to be treated outside of the regulations

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		67IC	Requesting additional marks
		67IC49A	Seeking additional marks
		78IC21	Expecting to be treated outside of the regulations
		78IC21A	Expecting to be treated outside of the regulations
		89IC45	Only wanting special treatment as deserved
		89IC50	Expecting that late work should be marked as if it had been handed in on time.
		89IC137	Requesting a failed mark is changed
		89IC180	Asking that failed unit be condoned as advised was possible by tutor
		90IC70	Asking the Assessment Board for a last chance to take a failed assessment
		90IC55	Noting that only one unit is failed with one mark
		90IC107	Requesting a return to studies with repeat year
		90IC133	Asking to be treated exceptionally
KP12	<i>Having future plans jeopardised</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC40	Perceiving that poor degree will affect further study and employment
		89IC57	Advising that master's place depends on a successful appeal
		89IC72	Advising that plans for a legal career will be lost if the student gets an unclassified degree.
		89IC73	Detailing the personal effects of getting an unclassified degree: weight loss, broken dreams and future life ruined.
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP13	<i>Having no choice</i>	67IC33	Having no choice
		78IC68	Having no choice
		89IC96	Feeling in a desperate position
		89IC105	Being prepared to do anything to make up for a mistake
		89IC106	Having a chance for a degree being

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

			taken away
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP14	<i>Having financial problems</i>	67IC34	Experiencing financial pressures
		67IC80	Having external commitments (work)
		67IC63	Experiencing financial problems
		67IC78	Not being able to afford further study
		67IC34A	Experiencing financial pressures
		78IC6	Experiencing financial problems
		78IC6A	Experiencing financial problems
		78IC92	Experiencing heavy costs to study
		78IC92A	Experiencing heavy costs to study
		89IC32	Needing to retain a loan to cover very expensive tuition fees (Jersey)
		89IC70	Experiencing additional problems relating to being in debt
		90IC53	Noting that failure means money is wasted in tuition fees by a family that is not rich
		90IC117	Being unable to afford resit fees
		90IC121	Being unemployed and struggling to meet heavy tuition fees
		90IC130	Expressing concern about incurring further debt as a result of not progressing
		90IC153	Not being able to afford another year's study
KP15	<i>Experiencing mental health problems</i>	67IC35	Suffering mental health pressures
		67IC35A	Suffering mental health pressures
		67IC50	Could not seek university help (stressed)
		67IC17A	Experiencing stress
		67IC65	Expressing anticipated mental state if appeal fails
		67IC16	Being in a confused state
		67IC17	Experiencing stress
		78IC25	Being stressed
		78IC60	Suffering mental health pressures
		78IC60A	Suffering mental health pressures
		89IC2	Suffering mental stress
		89IC4	Suffering acute mental stress
		89IC36	Suffering depression due to

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

			workload including resits
		89IC92	Arguing that the nature of mental illness means a late diagnosis in terms of impacting an assessment
		89IC82	Suffering emotional strain and depression
		90IC46	Being deeply depressed
		90IC85	Being traumatised and frustrated and pleading for help
		90IC122	Suffering extensive stress (complaint)
KP16	<i>Encountering a hostile culture</i>	67IC79	Experiencing an invasion of privacy
		67IC40	Being subject to a breach of individual rights as a student
		67IC41	Being harassed and victimised
		67IC42	Experiencing a hostile environment
		67IC38	Following advice without result
		67IC69	Being given no sympathy
		67IC71	Not being supported by the University
		67IC14	Being afraid to speak up
		78IC18	Feeling insulted
		78IC46	Finding the university unsupportive
		78IC46A	Finding the university unsupportive
		78IC69	Feeling harassed
		78IC69A	Feeling harassed
		89IC162	Receiving no guidance from the university regarding evidence to support an unsuccessful EC submission
		90IC65	Being badly treated by faculty student support officer
		90IC68	Passing everything except one unit which the tutor failed due to discrimination
		90IC61	Blaming tutor for failure due to discriminatory attitude
		90IC56	Stating that poor performance is due to pressure and harassment
		90IC58	Noting that academic performance has been affected by the rude and discriminatory behaviour of staff member
		90IC156	Requesting another (exceptional)



## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

			opportunity to submit the assessment
KP17	<i>"It's not my fault"</i>	67IC19	'It's not my fault'
		67IC19A	'It's not my fault'
		78IC4	'Not my fault'
		78IC30	Accepting no personal liability for a failed submission
		78IC71	'Not my fault'
		89IC7	'It's not my fault'
		89IC7A	'Not my fault'
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP18	<i>Coping with a bereavement</i>	67IC47	Coping with a bereavement
		67IC47A	Coping with a bereavement
			<b>No codes 2007-2008</b>
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP19	<i>Expecting a qualification by right ('The Deal')</i>	67IC18	Expecting a qualification ('The Deal')
		78IC28A	Being 'short-changed' by results
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP20	<i>Experiencing poor communications</i>	67IC51	Failing to provide information to students
		67IC52	Being subject to confused communications
		67IC62	Expecting the university to inform students what they must do
		78IC1	Receiving confusing information from the University
		78IC36	Being subject to poor communication
		78IC1A	Receiving confusing information from the university
		78IC1B	Receiving confusing information from the university
		78IC36A	Being subject to poor communication
		78IC36B	Being subject to poor communication
		78IC36C	Being subject to poor communication

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		89IC19	Stressing how difficult it is for all students to access information
		89IC117	Chasing up staff in the faculty office for information
		89IC118	Not finding information on the portal as advised
		89IC157	not receiving appropriate information about Accredited Prior Learning from the university
		89IC156	Not receiving clear communications about results
		90IC23	threatening to submit another complaint
		90IC24	Being very stressed by the complaint incident
		90IC35	Receiving no information from the university regarding an unsuccessful extenuating circumstances submission
		90IC67	Blaming an incidence of plagiarism on lack of awareness
		90IC112	Blaming the Student Support Network Officer for not advising of a new policy
		90IC142	Not being advised of need to retake a second piece of work
		90IC145	Explaining that assessment was submitted and marks returned without any indication the work was late and would receive a penalty mark of zero
		90IC166	Noting that university policies and procedures can be complicated for students to read
		90IC167	Commenting that students at final level still rely on being given information (e.g. via my course/tutors responding); there is too much confusion around assessments for students to act independently
		90IC164	Providing further examples of where students were misled on assessments
KP21	<i>Challenging the university</i>	67IC58	Experiencing the university's 'draconian' policies (extenuating circumstances)
		67IC72	Requesting a re-mark

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		67IC60	Being unhappy with the university's extenuating circumstances policy
		67IC61	Accusing the university of breaching assessment confidentiality
		78IC24	Challenging university policy
		78IC41	Disputing university statements
		78IC47	Being assertive
		78IC47A	Being assertive
		78IC23	Challenging university staff
		78IC57	Asserting individual rights
		78IC24A	Challenging university policy
		78IC62	Challenging academic judgement
		78IC62A	Challenging academic judgement
		78IC99	Stating that university solution for lack of resource was inadequate
		78IC43	Perceiving university decisions as 'bizarre'
		89IC28	Rejecting university solution and pushing own
		89IC59	Not accepting a low mark
		89IC60	Challenging the appeal process
		89IC65	Being suspicious of the outcome of faculty appeal panel and requesting an 'honest investigation'
		89IC175	Appealing against the award of a Diploma in Higher Education having studied degree after HND
		89IC177	Noting that award rules are out of line with the sector
		89IC69	Being very indignant about refusal of faculty level appeal
		89IC95	Feeling the rejection of the faculty level appeal was unfair and ignored relevant points
		89IC126	Feeling that faculty response is not justified and has not addressed the issues
		89IC125	Stating the calculations in arriving at a revised classification calculation (3rd to a 2.2)
		90IC16	Stating purpose of the submission is to obtain an independent review
		90IC72	Explaining rationale for a late appeal due to expectations of a marks change
		90IC108	Advising that the academic tutor considered work to be of a 2.1 standard

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		90IC144	Explaining that work could not be printed following submission but that academic staff agreed to read the USB direct
		90IC5	Insisting there has been an error
		90IC96	Giving examples of 'definite injustice' in the marking system
		90IC100	Feeling something is suspect
		90IC110	Not accepting that medical evidence submitted is not appropriate
		90IC111	Challenging the expectation that a student would be aware of a policy change
		90IC135	Enclosing email exchanges with faculty as evidence of appeal issues
		90IC146	Believing that work must have been lost and there must be a mark somewhere
		90IC157	Advising that all final level work has been sent to the faculty to evidence standard of student's work
		90IC158	Noting that the assessment board did not raise the classification despite evidence of impact on marks
		90IC170	Insisting the tutor has made an error in marking
KP22	<i>Deserving better outcomes</i>	67IC31	Being deserving of award
		67IC36	Expecting a specific outcome
		67IC36A	Expecting a specific outcome
		67IC57	Meriting a better result
		67IC66	Meriting additional marks
		67IC66A	Meriting additional marks
		67IC73	Expecting higher marks
		78IC27	Expecting a positive outcome
		78IC29	Being puzzled by a result
		78IC29A	Being puzzled by a result
		78IC32	Getting unexpectedly poor results
		78IC50	Working very hard
		78IC78	Meriting a better result
		78IC51A	Being surprised by failure
		78IC80	Meriting a better classification
		78IC59	Expecting a specific outcome
		78IC93	Expecting a higher grade as a result of supervisor feedback
		89IC6	Expecting a specific outcome (2.1)

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		89IC41	Needing time to sort herself out
		89IC63	Asserting that hard work deserves the master's not a diploma
		89IC87	Expecting a positive outcome
		89IC88	Meriting higher marks
		89IC89	Being disadvantaged by late penalty
		90IC71	Realising only one mark away from compensation
		90IC75	Not perceiving any value in achieving an exit award
		90IC91	Feeling greatly annoyed by getting music recognised in the music industry but not awarded many marks by academics
		90IC92	Providing evidence of external validation of the quality of the work
		90IC93	Considering the university is failing to recognise standard of work in marking
		90IC94	Comparing marks with another student who is 'know where near as academically intelligent' but gets a similar mark
		90IC107	Requesting a return to studies with repeat year
		90IC113	Promoting personal success in winning an award on course
		90IC155	Being worth more than an unclassified degree
KP23	<i>Wishing to discuss complaint</i>	67IC64	Needing a meeting to explain further
		67IC21	Wishing to discuss complaint
		78IC10	Wanting to discuss issues
		78IC10A	Wanting to discuss matters
		78IC10B	Wanting to discuss issues
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
		90IC22	Wishing to discuss the complaint with staff
KP24	<i>Not getting value for money</i>	67IC74	Feeling it is not worth getting in to debt for poor marks
		67IC77	Failing to get a 2.2 classification
		78IC97	Being horrified by lack of resources
		78IC97A	Being horrified by lack of resources
		89IC13	Reminding the university that tuition fees mean a huge debt

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		89IC64	Failing to get the degree paid for
		89IC80	Being worried about getting in to debt without the benefit of a degree
		89IC81	Advising that failing a degree is a waste of money and life
		90IC98	Getting poor value for money
		90IC99	Believing that because there has been little teaching required there is justification for a re-marking of the work
		90IC169	Noting that attending university is a big investment
KP25	<i>Damaging employment prospects</i>	67IC75	Perceiving that poor degree will affect further study and employment
		67IC30A	Linking specific academic achievement with employment
		67IC30	Linking specific academic achievement with employment
		78IC40	Perceiving that poor degree will affect further study and employment
		89IC138	Failing to achieve main award
		89IC146	Needing improved classification to take up master's course and career plans
		90IC69	Being worried about the future for employment and children
		90IC76	Stating that an exit will impact on ability to secure work in home country
		90IC103	Stating that career and master's opportunities are ruined because of borderline mark and failure to achieve higher classification (2.1)
		90IC124	Stressing that due to the economic climate a good degree is critical for job opportunities.
KP26	<i>Being given incorrect advice</i>	67IC68A	Being given incorrect advice
		78IC53	Receiving incorrect advice
		78IC53A	Receiving incorrect advice
		89IC13	Reminding the university that tuition fees mean a huge debt
		89IC158	Being given inaccurate information by academic staff about tuition fees

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP27	<i>Experiencing administrative errors</i>	67IC24	Being subject to administrative errors
		67IC24A	Being subject to administrative errors
		78IC16	Experiencing administrative errors
		78IC49	Being subject to administrative errors
		78IC16A	Experiencing administrative errors
		89IC9	Not being sent the correct referral work for trailing units
		89IC68	Claiming late receipt of outstanding resit work
		89IC83	Being the victim of faculty errors
		89IC84	Advising faculty failure to provide resit opportunities
		89IC116	Not being given chance to undertake a failed assignment (trailing resit)
		89IC119	Being informed it was too late to undertake failed work
		89IC123	Confirming confusion around marks
		89IC159	Noting that University staff were also confused by the APL process
		90IC80	Advising that there has been an obvious mistake in the student's results profile
		90IC81	Advising that an incorrect mark was released online
		90IC82	Querying a referred result which was an expected deferred results
		90IC83	Advising that an assessment was a group effort and the group had done very well but unsure where mark has gone
KP28	<i>'Tell me what to do'!</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC3	Not being told what to do by the university
		78IC11	'Tell me what to do'!
		78IC5	Acting on incorrect academic advice
		78IC3A	Expecting the university to inform students what they must do
		78IC88	Expecting the university to inform students what they must do
		89IC103	Not being told the full details of the assessment regulations

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		90IC173	Expecting to be advised by the university of errors in the submission process
KP29	<i>Failing to understand assessment requirements</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC7	Finding assessment brief confusing
		89IC5	Being frustrated by the assessment process
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP30	<i>Experiencing a failure in duty of care</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC12	Experiencing a failure in duty of care
		78IC17	Being frustrated by the situation
		90IC123	Advising that the university should not be placing students in this stressful situation
KP31	<i>Being confused by regulations</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC26	Being confused by regulations
		78IC34	Misunderstanding university procedures
		78IC84	Not understanding the regulations
		89IC29	Failing to understand university regulations
		89IC23	Being distressed by not understanding results
		89IC74	Failing to notice that a deficit had been failed
		89IC75	Being shocked to have a fail result
		89IC104	Noting that assessment regulations are not clear
		89IC122	Not accepting faculty query outcome and assuming the faculty are wrong
		89IC153	Contacting the university too late and learning mistaken assumption
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP32	<i>Suffering a disproportionate penalty</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC44	Receiving a disproportionate financial penalty (for withdrawal)
		89IC127	Feeling a unit fail mark does not



## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

			justify the loss of a master's degree
		89IC134	viewing a fail mark as a 'punishment'
		90IC127	Considering the outcome as a penalty for past mistakes
KP33	<i>Being disadvantaged by a disability</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC45	Being disadvantaged by a disability
		78IC79	Experiencing discrimination (disability)
		89IC17	Outlining the challenges of being a disabled student
		89IC18	Highlighting the university's failure to provide the disability support needed on a consistent basis
		89IC20	Experiencing difficulties following course requirements due to disability
		89IC21	Being overwhelmed by volume of work as a disabled student
		90IC129	Advising that not progressing to the next academic year would be demotivating and challenging due to dyslexia
KP34	<i>Raising multiple complaint issues</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC52	Complaining about historical problems
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP35	<i>Receiving no family support</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC64	Receiving no family support
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP36	<i>Promoting personal effort</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC67D	Promoting personal effort
		78IC67	Promoting personal effort
		78IC67C	Promoting personal effort
		78IC67A	Promoting personal effort
		78IC67B	Promoting personal effort

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		78IC67E	Promoting personal effort
		78IC81	Emphasising discussions with tutor
		78IC91	Moving back home to concentrate on studies
		89IC14	Providing evidence of continual dialogue with the university
		89IC16	Doing everything possible to get missing work
		89IC44	Stressing all the hard work undertaken
		89IC99	Confirming personal hard work and effort
		89IC100	Being confident about personal academic performance
		89IC108	Highlighting a work based placement to support studies
		89IC147	Being a 'hard working and devoted student'
		90IC20	Being first generation in HE
		90IC54	Emphasising the heavy workload completed to study and do resits
		90IC57	Stressing personal attendance and commitment
		90IC62	Promoting personal achievements in other colleges and exams
		90IC128	Confirming belief in ability to undertake referrals and progress
		90IC152	Working very hard for three years
KP37	<i>Being let down by the university</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC75A	Being let down by the university
		78IC47A	Finding the university unsupportive
		78IC83	Feeling let down by tutor
		78IC85	Believing university is jeopardising academic future
		78IC89	Losing faith in faculty staff
		78IC89A	Feeling utterly let down by faculty staff
		89IC42	Being let down by the 'university system'
		89IC40	Feeling disrespected that impact of loss of relative not appreciated
		89IC58	Not trusting academic staff
		89IC151	Being deeply disappointed about situation
		89IC152	Deciding to have nothing to do with the university on believing that

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

			Accredited Prior Learning units did not count towards the degree
		90IC101	Feeling that whole amazing experience at university has been ruined by low marking
		90IC114	Feeling misled by the university
		90IC143	Not wishing to regret studying at the university or paying so much money
KP38	<i>Not being able to control things that are going wrong</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC54	Feeling disempowered
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP39	<i>Being a better person for studying the course</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC55	Appreciating the learning
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP40	<i>Accusing another student personally</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC74	Breaching privacy
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP41	<i>Researching the regulations</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC76	Researching the regulations
		89IC85	Quoting university policies
		89IC101	Being tactical about resitting (get a good coursework score so need less in exams)
		89IC112	Seeking a deferral based on evidence submitted
		89IC113	Understanding assessment terminology
		90IC2	Knowing the regulations

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		90IC125	Being one mark from passing an exam and working out the hours of additional study time to continue
		90IC137	Confirming intention to hand in work rather than claim extenuating circumstances or all effort and impact on lifestyle would be a waste
		89IC176	Stating understanding of university's regulations
KP42	<i>Being disadvantaged by university policy</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
			<b>No codes 2007-2008</b>
		89IC3	Being disadvantaged by university policy (EC)
		89IC93	Following procedures exactly as advised
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP43	<i>Needing closure</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		78IC90	Needing a sense of closure
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP44	<i>Accepting responsibility</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
		89IC12	Accepting that there can be mistakes on both sides
		89IC77	Being responsible for situation
		89IC102	Open about not taking resits (moving house)
		89IC111	Stating personal errors
		89IC139	Accepting personal responsibility
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
		90IC106	Recognising that there should have been no return to university until fully fit
		90IC132	Recognising own failure in not asking for help at the time
		90IC138	Admitting wrong decision – was not in a fit state to submit or make a reasoned decision
KP45	<i>Not aligning with university policy and procedures</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
			<b>No codes 2007-2008</b>

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		89IC26	Providing no evidence of EC
		89IC27	Expecting the university to contact third parties for evidence
		89IC38	Choosing to ignore help available
		89IC52	Telling the university the date that late work can be submitted
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP46	<i>Feeling under pressure</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
			<b>No codes 2007-2008</b>
		89IC37	Having insufficient time to complete workload
		89IC49	Emphasising all the pressures impacting on ability to submit work
		89IC133	Stating that there is too much work to do
			<b>No codes 2009-2010</b>
KP47	<i>Not wanting to let people down</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
			<b>No codes 2007-2008</b>
		89IC56	Not wanting to disappoint parents
		89IC66	Stressing the impact on parents who have funded heavy course cost and expect a master's degree
		90IC77	Stating that failure to achieve the final award will lead to family dishonour
KP48	<i>Not being able to contact an academic tutor</i>		<b>One code 2009-2010 moved to KP6</b>
KP49	<i>Challenging Academic Standards</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
			<b>No codes 2007-2008</b>
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
		90IC84	Refuting the accuracy of the University's marking process
		90IC89	Disagreeing with academic judgement
		90IC95	Complaining about double marking methodology
		90IC160	Considering the classification system to be rigid

## Enclosure 3 to Appendix RD.2

### STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS 2006 - 2010: SUMMARY KEY POINT CODING

		90IC161	Providing an example of the university changing the rules when it wants (changing assessment regulations)
KP50	<i>Experiencing a failure of university services</i>		<b>No codes 2006-2007</b>
			<b>No codes 2007-2008</b>
			<b>No codes 2008-2009</b>
		90IC118	Having evidence of failure of university IT systems
		90IC120	Noting that information on the student VLE was removed early and not available

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<p><b>Conceptual Core Category:</b></p> <p><b>Core Category 10:</b></p> <p><b>Encountering a hostile culture</b></p> <p><b>(incorporating CCs 1, 5,6,7,15)</b></p>	<p>Studying in an academic learning environment that is overtly unsupportive:</p> <p><i>I have had no academic support from the university.</i></p> <p>(Student 78L)</p>	<p>Cultural: prevalent throughout the academic year and involves interaction with academic and administrative staff.</p>	<p>University – within the learning environment primarily but note that one student advises that a member of Halls staff ...<i>creates an intimidating, hostile or humiliating atmosphere for me.</i></p> <p>(Student 67I)</p> <p>Also echoed in perceived inefficiencies in the administration (lost work/incorrect advice).</p>	<p>Primarily in interaction with academic staff where there is ...<i>very little input from fellow students who cower in fear of opening their mouths.</i></p> <p>(Student 67C)</p>	<p>Poor individual academic performance because the student has found the university so unsupportive.</p> <p>The student is a victim:</p> <p><i>After all the hard work I have put in I feel completely and utterly let down by the very people whom I initially felt were there to help, guide and support me.</i></p> <p>(Student 78AA)</p>	<p>As a result of perceived lack of support the student cannot progress on course or secure the award they believe they are due:</p> <p><i>This letter provides many reasons that were totally out of my control. As a body such as yourselves with the infrastructure and resources you have and the many staff in employment, I feel these situations a student should never encounter.</i></p> <p>(Student 90O)</p>

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<b>Core Category 1:</b> <i>Being disadvantaged as an overseas student</i>	<p>Having additional demands to deal with as a result of being an overseas student that are not supported by the University:</p> <p><i>As a foreign student in United Kingdom, I have found that, there are quite a lot of issues needed for assistance.</i> (Student 89V)</p>	Throughout the course.	<p>Home: where the student is required to return home to meet family expectations: <i>...my father needed me for the family business</i> (Student 89R).</p> <p>Home: where the student has to return home to resolve visa issues.</p> <p>Home: experiencing additional pressure due to family struggling to pay high fees: <i>I don't want to disappoint my parents as they have paid so much for my studies.</i> (Student 89J)</p> <p>Academic: where UK academic practice is different: <i>I came from a different assessment background in India.</i> (Student 89G)</p>	<p>Family bereavement/ Problems.</p> <p>Problem with immigration status.</p>	<p>The student may be required to return home to meet cultural expectations e.g. extended bereavement period <i>...it's a very religious time for us at the moment.</i> (Student 67K)</p> <p>The student is unable to complete assessments due to responding to cultural family requirements.</p>	<p>The University has not provided help at a point the student is struggling:</p> <p><i>The... team does not appear to be sympathetic to the problems faced by foreign students who have invested large amounts of money to study in the UK and rely upon the University for support and help during their stay in this country.</i> (Student 67M).</p> <p>Personal devastation about academic failure the student feels they have letting the family down and being unable to secure employment or continue to a master's degree: <i>Further I cannot go to my home country and seek any employment with this certificate and it will be disrespect from my family if they come to know this.</i> (Student 90I)</p>



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<b>Core Category 5:</b> <i>Expressing dissatisfaction with the complaint process</i>	<p>Being suspicious of faculty staff motives in handling the complaint at the initial stage (faculty level): expressed as distrust about the lack of application in dealing with the complaint:</p> <p><i>The result of the appeal board made me more suspicious... (Student 89K) ...and I dispute the thoroughness of any investigation. (Student 67C)</i></p>	<p>The actual expression of dissatisfaction is at the point a complaint is rejected. However, importantly, dissatisfaction is engendered at the point the student experiences the cause of the complaint. The experience of the complaint itself then drives a further lack of faith in the fairness of the complaint process.</p>	<p>Centred in the immediate learning environment and subsequently within engagement with the wider university administration giving rise to disenchantment with the university culture.</p>	<p>The trigger point for raising the complaint at university level is the failure by staff to address the complaint and the perceived injustice:</p> <p><i>I hoped I would receive a response that would either confirm my appeal or provide the marking/feedback sheet, which would explain to me where my work failed. The response I received gave me no further information...I was not reassured by this reply especially as it did not even state correct information regarding my unit marks. (Student 78I)</i></p>	<p>The student loses faith in the wider university itself as a support system:</p> <p><i>I feel confused and let down by the university system I thought would be there for me and understand my needs during the hard time I was going through. (Student 89H)</i></p>	<p>The student feels the only opportunity for redress and fairness is to complain to a higher level:</p> <p><i>The problem is that precisely because I have lost faith in the department, I feel that it is necessary to appeal to the university itself in order to ascertain a more objective point of view. (Student 78AA)</i></p>

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<b>Core Category 6:</b> <b>Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice</b>	<p>Individual academic staff failure to provide threshold standards of academic provision e.g. discourteous to students; showing favouritism; being consistently unavailable:  <i>Xxx was rarely in the university and I was not one of the select students who had her personal mobile phone number to arrange meetings etc. so throughout the year it proved impossible to speak with her.</i>            (Student 67C)</p>	<p>Ongoing throughout the year and targeted to individual units and individual members of staff.</p>	<p>University: personal tutorials where students are subject to e.g.:  <i>Virilic personal diatribes from the tutors</i>            (Student 67C)            or personal tutorials where students are given no indication they are under-performing:  <i>...no indication during the production of this work that it was not of the standard I am capable of....never being questioned about my apparent under achievement in the final year, I had no opportunity to try and improve this.</i>            (Student 78I)</p>	<p>Perception of a final breakdown in relations with individual academic staff: students are aware of the bad practice and persevere; the trigger is the point at which the student perceives they are personally disadvantaged by the poor provision.</p>	<p>Unable to secure academic staff support with their studies:  <i>I made every effort to see that lecturer and she was never in her office during office hours.</i>            (Student 89P)              Not being aware of academic position due to lack of formal feedback of results.              A breakdown in trust. With no evidence of second marking one student complains:  <i>I don't trust this teacher that he can mark my paper fairly.</i>            (Student 89K)</p>	<p>As the result of shock when the student only becomes aware on receipt of results that academic staff failings have impacted them:    <i>I am appealing on the grounds that I feel the tutoring I received as an undergraduate was inconsistent which in turn held critical implications for the grade I finally received.</i>            (Student 78AA)</p>

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<b>Core Category 7:</b> <b>Being subject to unfair treatment</b>	<p>Being prevented from achieving an <u>expected outcome</u> due to discriminatory assessment practice by the University. Students argue that it:</p> <p><i>....is not a fair judgement (Student 90S) where they are prevented from doing something by the assessment regulations specifically.</i></p>	<p>At any point where an academic judgement is made that the student does not agree with. This will normally take place at the end of the academic year when the student receives their end of year results.</p>	<p>University – in the academic learning environment and noting in particular that most student's dissatisfaction is not articulated in a personal way to any one member of staff. Unfairness is perceived to be at a corporate level:</p> <p><i>..I will finish my degree feeling that the University has served me most unfairly (Student 90N)</i></p>	<p>A decision has been made that prevents the student moving forward academically in some way:</p> <p><i>I will not stop fighting for this appeal and I will do whatever it takes to continue my third year, as I feel I have been unfairly treated by the university. Therefore I will take this further.... (Student 89W)</i></p>	<p>The student is academically disadvantaged by what they consider is the unfairness of an assessment decision:</p> <p><i>I feel that it would be really unjust if I was to be capped as I have followed advice and guidelines from the university...do not punish me for my misfortunes over the last couple of months. (Student 67T)</i></p>	<p>The student has been put in a position that they do not think they should be in and through no fault of their own:</p> <p><i>I'm very determined to have my grade altered, and really wouldn't push for it if I didn't feel I had been misled and unfairly graded. (Student 89AA)</i></p>

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<p><b>Core Category 15:</b></p> <p><b>Experiencing administrative errors</b></p>	<p>Being adversely impacted by errors by administrative staff normally associated with the assessment area - either transposing marks or sending incorrect referral work to students: <i>However when they sent the work to retake, they only sent me Economics assignment but the finance was not sent.</i> (Student 78P)</p>	<p>At any time during the academic year noting that the student does not always appreciate the impact of the error until the end of the academic year when they receive their results.</p>	<p>At the course interface with faculty administration.</p>	<p>Errors are often associated with confusion regarding the issue in hand and the student not being able to move forward as a result: <i>I was informed there had been an administrative error; however no-one really understood the regulations and some were saying I could do the assignment if I wanted to whilst others were saying I couldn't.</i> (Student 78F)</p>	<p>The impact is often disproportionate to the original error e.g. Student 89B was not sent a piece of resit work which they did not chase up. The oversight of someone forgetting to put something in an envelope resulted in the student failing a unit: <i>I cannot stress how important this is and that there is nothing more I could of done! This is a mistake in the faculty office and not mine!</i> (Student 89B)</p>	<p>Students complain when they have tried all other avenues to resolve what appears to them to be utter confusion and at a point when they are at the end of their tether: <i>Please I earnestly plead in frustration that you come to my rescue in this matter because am presently traumatised by this eventuality at the last few days of my programme.</i> (Student 90J)</p>

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<p><b>Conceptual Core Category:</b></p> <p><b>Core Category 16:</b></p> <p><b>Tell me what to do!</b></p> <p><b>(incorporating CCs 2, 3, 8, 12, 18)</b></p>	<p>Student expectation that the University will be proactive and supportive, primarily in drawing their attention to relevant information at the point at which it becomes important.</p>	<p>Ongoing as part of the psychological contract in the mind of the student: students have an expectation that university staff should advise them what they need to do and when.</p> <p>Riverside's stance is that information is available – so access it:</p> <p><i>I accept that the faculty made efforts electronically and visually to inform me that I should complete the work. However I submit that a verbal sentence of maybe 3 words from my tutor could have saved my university career.</i></p> <p>(Student 78C)</p>	<p>The learning environment and the interface with assessment requirements.</p>	<p>At the point it becomes obvious to a student that they have not done something they should have done because they were not aware of the requirement.</p>	<p>The impact on the student can be devastating – as with core category CC15 (experiencing administrative errors):</p> <p><i>Because of this misunderstanding I am only eligible for an unclassified degree which is very upsetting and could cost me a lot in life for me because of me being misunderstood of the conditions</i></p> <p>(Student 89S)</p>	<p>The student wishes to avoid being disadvantaged by what they perceive to be the university's failure to support with proactive advice:</p> <p><i>At this crucial stage of my degree if the tutor knew something was wrong why not write a note to home and/or phone my mobile?...I would like to plead with you that, especially in a final year, more effort is made to contact students if there are any concerns which could affect their degree classification.</i></p> <p>(Student 78V)</p>

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Core Category 2: <i>Submitting a deferential complaint</i>	Submitting an extremely polite and apparently obsequious written complaint in which the student does not overtly criticise the university but makes it clear that he/she has been disadvantaged:  <i>I completely appreciate that this massive oversight was in fact my responsibility ....I would like to thank you for taking the time to read my appeal and will eagerly await hearing from you</i> (Student 89V)	At any point in the academic year.	Home (culture/ethnicity): students whose writing deferential writing style results from their cultural inheritance. (Nkemleke, 2004)	Academic failure when the student's academic future is threatened and they need help: <i>Please give me another chance I know I deserve it because I am an intelligent person who really wants to learn and improve my life.</i> (Student 67A)  An additional two overseas students in the same sample write: <i>I would really appreciate your help</i> (Student 67K and Student 67L).	Reluctant to tackle academic staff due to a cultural background embedding respect for elders.	The student is reluctant to complain and culturally disinclined to do so but threats to their future determine student action: <i>I don't want to blame my teacher ever, as I have been told since from childhood that children have greater respects that (sic) parents, I always addressed her respected teacher but now there is matter of my career and whole life, and I am being discriminated badly there for I am begging for justice only.</i> (Student 90H)

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<p><b>Core Category 3:</b></p> <p><b><i>Experiencing an extenuating circumstance (EC)</i></b></p>	<p>Personal circumstances that prevent the student from submitting assessments and which the student has not normally disclosed to the university prior to Assessment Boards confirming marks as is required by the EC policy:</p> <p><i>...the decision to get extenuating circumstances at that time was a difficult one, as I was struggling with my health issues, and it would have been too much for me to cope with.</i></p> <p>(Student 78G)</p>	<p>During short intermittent periods throughout the year.</p> <p>During assessment periods only.</p> <p>Across the academic year where students have historical life matters to deal with and these emerge as acute flare ups.</p>	<p>In the close family environment: personal issues and issues relating to relatives.</p> <p>Within a close social circle – friends.</p> <p>In home country (international students).</p> <p>In the community (e.g. police or social services involvement).</p>	<p>Various personal matters.</p> <p>Death in family:</p> <p><i>After losing my cousin to an unfortunate murder just a few months previous to this my mind was focused on caring for my mother and making sure she recovers fully.</i></p> <p>(Student 90G)</p> <p>Personal Illness.</p> <p>Cultural requirement to support family at home.</p> <p>Unexpected pregnancy.</p> <p>An external third party: police/social services.</p>	<p>Does not feel able to focus on following university procedures.</p> <p>Unable to attend University due to having to return home.</p> <p>Is not mentally fit to consider if they are well enough to study.</p> <p>Failure to take appropriate action due to e.g. Thinking EC will not impact marks or not understanding the EC policy:</p> <p><i>My contention is that I was not able to tell the extent to which my ill health was impacting on my academic work.</i></p> <p>(Student 67O)</p>	<p>Receiving lower marks due to EC not being recognised.</p> <p>Their personal situation has not been fully considered; thus there is an expectation of higher marks even where EC is accepted.</p> <p>Feeling under pressure to submit weak assessments due to worry about failing to get EC approved by the university's EC Panel.</p> <p>Things have happened to the student that are outside of their control and they have been penalised for it:</p> <p><i>It's not my making that I was ill.</i></p> <p>(Student 67E)</p>

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<b>Core Category 8:</b> <i>Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail</i>	<p>The description of extremely personal – and devastating – circumstances in <u>great detail</u> that, in most cases, the complainant previously felt unable to disclose to anyone even with confidential provision:</p> <p><i>.. the reason that I did not inform my course tutors at the time of the start of my mums illness was because I naively thought that I would be able to manage the course</i>            (Student 78R)</p>	<p>After the student's end of year results have been issued.</p>	<p>Riverside's learning environment: At the point of submitting a complaint: the associated event has happened but only becomes relevant as the basis of a complaint when the student appreciates the full impact:</p> <p><i>With full hindsight, and a good presence of mind such as I have now, I know that I should not have submitted my work for assessment, instead I should have gone through the extenuating circumstances procedure</i>            (Student 78G)</p>	<p>A significant threat to achieving an award: being withdrawn from course due to academic failure, being unable to progress to the next year of the course, being penalised in a key unit (final level dissertation):</p> <p><i>As it has now come to the final point, where it is a struggle to either give up on my study dreams or become an uneducated young house wife, I chose to fight in every way I can to overpower my parents will</i>            (Student 78S)</p>	<p>The student now has no inhibition in disclosing intimate details of family life and the activities of individual named members.</p> <p>The student may contravene cultural norms that expect family matters to be kept within the family: <i>It would not be acceptable for me to discuss in detail the business or personal affairs of my father or mother to a non-family person For this reason it was impossible for me to discuss the problem when it first arose. That I wrote as much as I did in my appeal letter is only with the permission of my father.</i>            (Student 89E)</p>	<p>The circumstances are preventing the student achieving what they set out to achieve at university. There is recognition that those circumstances are not the university's fault but the university is perceived by the student to have a role in addressing the injustice:</p> <p><i>I cannot understand why an unfortunate incident in my life should prevent me from being able to continue my studies like any other person of my age and make me feel excluded from the university's community or affect my future career by reminding me of this unhappy period of my life</i>            (Student 90K)</p>



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<b>Core Category 12:</b> <b>Experiencing poor communications</b>	<p>Not receiving key information from the university in a proactive way:</p> <p><i>Throughout the whole of the year, I never received any correspondence in relation to this project, or any notification of when such work had to be handed in.</i>            (Student 78A)</p>	<p>At the point information is needed: student complainants expect that they should not have to seek out information but that it should be available at the time they need it.</p>	<p>University based and particularly in the learning environment where information critical to delivery and assessment normally has to be pulled by the student rather than pushed by the university and is difficult to locate when the student knows they have something to find out:</p> <p><i>Any information regarding the course that needed to be obtained quickly could only be found amongst the disorganised mass of papers on the notice board</i>            (Student 89D)</p>	<p>The point at which the student believes that the mechanism of communication has been ineffective. Here there may be a mismatch between what the University thinks is appropriate and the students understanding.</p>	<p>The student is often pushed between varying staff members without making any progress:</p> <p><i>I have on several occasions been referred to my supervisor for information who has in turn referred me back to the xxx team and this went on for a long time before the information required was forthcoming.</i>            (Student 67M)</p>	<p>The student has failed to take action which is critical to successful progression on course because they were apparently not aware of the requirement to do so. The subsequent adverse impact is a complete shock to the student and perceived to be extremely unfair:</p> <p><i>The shock, in June, of being told that I had not submitted anything for Assignment 3 was total and unexpected.....xxx did not contact me by email and did not speak with me about my submission or lack of it. Therefore I was unaware that there had been a problem until June – some seven months later.</i>            (Student 90D)</p>

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<b>Core Category 18:</b> <b>Experiencing mental health issues</b>	<p>Students experiencing intense periods of mental stress which impact on their ability to submit assessments:</p> <p><i>I have been suffering from severe anxiety disorder and for much of that time I was unable to work effectively ...I was finding it impossible to eat properly, leave the house alone or concentrate and was struggling to complete the assignment.</i>            (Student 89O)</p>	<p>It becomes relevant at points of assessment deadlines.</p>	<p>This originates with lifestyle issues either long term or acute; it is not something that derives from Riverside's learning or social environment :</p> <p><i>I have been extremely depressed throughout the entire second year ....I am outlining an event that occurred before I commenced university.</i>            (Student 67P)</p>	<p>The student's inability to submit an assessment and not the mental health issue itself.</p>	<p>Impact can be quite devastating; pressures on individual students can be intolerable in the worse cases:</p> <p><i>I was violently attacked and left the city with no intention of returning...I went in for emergency counselling to help me deal with the emotional turmoil and stress.</i>            (Student 89A)</p>	<p>The university has failed to recognise their mental health issue as an excuse for not submitting assessed work:</p> <p><i>I honestly feel that the situation I was in has not been considered and as a result it seems like my health problems and other difficulties I have had have been seen as if I have been making excuses.</i>            (Student 67K)</p>

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<p><b>Conceptual Core Category</b></p> <p><b>Core Category 11:</b></p> <p><b>Expecting a qualification by right - 'The Deal' (Encompassing CCs 13, 9, 14, 4, 17)</b></p>	<p>The concept of 'The Deal' arises from a single student's statement in 2006-2007: <i>...I would be left with a postgraduate Diploma, that wasn't the deal, the deal is a master's degree</i> (Student 67E)</p> <p>It captures students' understanding (psychological contract) of their rights and expectations as a student of Riverside University.</p>	<p>For some students 'The Deal' may be an ongoing intrinsic part of academic life: the student has to follow procedures (Key Point 4) and to undertake personal effort (Key Point 36) and the university has to provide a supportive not hostile culture (Conceptual Core Category 10).</p>	<p>Intangible but sits within the student's general interaction with the university and encompasses an expectation of academic achievement.</p>	<p>Riverside University has broken 'The Deal' through : e.g. communicating badly (Core Category 12) and subjecting the student to academic bad practice (Core Category 6).</p>	<p>This is a transactional issue: where the student follows procedures and makes a personal effort they expect the university to support them and 'Tell me what to do!' (Core Category 16) and to provide the award. This is an expectation and there is shocked disappointment when the exchange does not happen.</p>	<p>The student has not being given what they believe they are entitled to:</p> <p><i>So I am writing this email to help me for attainment of my degree which is my right.</i></p> <p>(Student 90H)</p>

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<p><b>Core category 13:</b></p> <p><i>Challenging the university</i></p>	<p>Being critical about university decisions in an overtly aggressive fashion:</p> <p><i>Frankly I feel (Dean of faculty) has just swept the issue with my mark under the carpet claiming its mainly based on an academic judgement, which it isn't.....it's just outrageous frankly.</i> (Student 90L)</p>	<p>At the point the student perceives their result to put them at a disadvantage:</p> <p><i>I have been awarded a level that, for me, is disappointing and inhibits my employment opportunities in the current job market, as I am sure you are aware that many employers specify a minimum level of 2:1 to apply for the positions.</i> (Student 78I)</p>	<p>University: as the result of a decision by the course Assessment Board when it is perceived not to have acted in the best interest of the student.</p>	<p>An unexpected assessment outcome, normally associated with a disappointing classification. Students are influenced by perceptions of the currency of their award. Riverside students have a heightened sense of unfairness when they have not achieved the higher classification band.</p>	<p>Students perceive this to be unjust:</p> <p><i>I do not accept this decision – I believe he is mistaken.....I maintain that the only fair assessment in these circumstances is to give the benefit of the doubt to me, the student, and to award a Second Class Honours (lower division)</i> (Student 89V).</p>	<p>The challenge is prompted by personal disadvantage which is not deserved. Although the complainant uses challenging terminology the real influence is the need for assistance – the student has nowhere else to go:</p> <p><i>I am looking for assistance. I am asking for help.....What would you do in my situation? Please help.</i> (Student 78O)</p>

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### CONDITIONAL RELATIONSHIP GUIDE

CORE CATEGORY (CC)	WHAT: how is the category defined?	WHEN: during what stage of the academic year does the category occur?	WHERE: where does the category occur – home/university/work	WHY: What is the trigger point for the category occurring?	HOW: How does the category impact the student?	CONSEQUENCE: How does the category influence the student's decision to complain?
<b>Core Category 9: Involving a third party</b>	The proactive and also threatened intervention of a third party – normally a parent – in the complaint process – sometimes in an aggressive way: <i>..you may well be contacted by either my mother or father in the future as they are not best pleased at what has happened and may wish to progress further outside of the University procedures.</i> (Student 90U)	During the final stages of any appeal process and where the student has had a poor result. Student 67H's father writes on his behalf since the student has failed his degree and is devastated.	In complaint correspondence with university staff at university level.	At the point the student has had their complaint rejected at faculty level and is submitting a complaint at university level.	In some instances the student is abrogating responsibility to a parent: <i>I am writing to give permission for you to speak to my mother (...) about my appeal against the decision of the exam board.</i> (Student 89O). For others the parent is the initiator e.g. the student 90F is supported by a mother who takes an aggressive stance threatening the intervention of various academic bodies and on the basis the student felt he would be penalised if he tried to progress matters himself.	Students appear to need for additional external support in progressing their case with the university and appear to believe this will influence the outcome of their complaint positively e.g. one final year student advises she has copied in the Chancellor and her MP: <i>I have included evidence of the problem, including medical reports and a copy of a letter sent to .....(Chancellor) from ...MP, and I hope that with this evidence you will be able to help me.</i> (Student 67F)

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<b>Core Category 14:</b> <b><i>Deserving better outcomes</i></b>	<p>Where a student's academic result fails to meet the student's personal perception of their ability or reflect their view of the personal effort expended:</p> <p><i>I felt that my extensive work within this area...proved that I had indeed fulfilled the brief to an excellent standard.</i>            (Student 78AA)</p>	<p>At any the point during the year when the student receives notification of an assessment mark.</p>	<p>University: this is core to the learning environment.</p>	<p>Primarily a failed assessment and commonly where the student's award classification is borderline for the higher banding and the student does not achieve the higher award:  <i>Since receiving the lower grade I have felt pressured to get a higher qualification due to the demand for a 2.1 in all good graduate jobs.</i>            (Student 78O)</p>	<p>Like Core Category 7: Being Subject to Unfair Treatment, the student feels disadvantaged by a perceived unfair assessment approach but the consequences are more devastating where there is generally a perceived labelling attached to the nature of the final award:  <i>I am not a second class (lower) degree student.</i>            (Student 78W)</p>	<p>The impact is disproportionate. The student has only narrowly missed a higher classification but the student perceives there will be a significant and longer term disadvantage:  <i>...at times in the future I may not be taken any further in a company because I don't have a 2.1.</i>            (Student 90L)</p>

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<b>Core Category 4:</b> <b>Confirming adherence to university procedures</b>	<p>The effort made by students in their complaints to show how they were careful within the circumstances of the complaint to align with the requirements of academic staff or the associated procedures of the university.</p>	<p>At the point the student receives notification of their final end of year results.</p>	<p>University: on the release of results and primarily where the student becomes aware that their achievement does not meet what they anticipated.</p>	<p>Student expectations not being met; those expectations reflect an apparent belief that doing what university procedures and staff demand will have positive outcomes:  <i>I am concerned about the response I have received after following the correct university procedure...</i>            (Student 67S)</p>	<p>Students do not understand the outcome. Following advice of academic staff appears to be viewed as a guarantee of academic success and students appear bewildered when assessment marks do not meet their expectations:  <i>I returned to my tutor on several occasions to discuss the progress of my essay. I was not encouraged to redirect my plans</i>            (student 78Y)</p>	<p>The student has followed directions of academic staff but without the desired success. This is not deemed to be the student's fault. One student whose resit dissertation mark shows no improvement writes:  <i>Please consider that all year I have spent a significant time and energy for the realization of this Dissertation following the advice and guidance of.... which was my supervisor.</i>            (Student 78Z)</p>

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<b>Core Category 17:</b> <b>Promoting personal effort</b>	<p>Student perception of the value of the personal effort they have put in to their studies. The emphasis is on the scale of the student's effort rather than the assessed standard of the output.</p>	<p>The student will make effort throughout the academic year often in accordance with advice from academic tutors but the outcomes of that effort is measured by the student in assessment marks:</p> <p><i>But it just doesn't seem to of been recognised in the marking. It's just not good enough...it's just outrageous frankly.</i>            (Student 90L)</p>	<p>University – learning environment in relation to assessment.</p>	<p>Student expectations have not been met:</p> <p><i>I have been awarded a level that, for me, is disappointing and inhibits my employment opportunities...</i>            (Student 78I)</p>	<p>Promoting personal effort also aligns with Core Category 14</p> <p>Deserving Better Outcomes: due to personal effort students believe their academic standing is such that they should be awarded higher marks:</p> <p><i>I have tried hard in every subject and have completed and handed every piece of work and was getting good marks for all my work ....and was therefore confident that I would definitely pass...</i>            (Student 89S)</p>	<p>Failure to take account of their personal input appropriately means the student feels academically disadvantaged as a result:</p> <p><i>I am totally unsatisfied with the result of my appeal. I've worked very hard in the 3 years studied, I have a clear conscience about all the effort I put into my degree. I really don't think I deserve an Unclassified degree</i>            (Student 90T)</p>



### **Theoretical Memorandum: Conceptual Core Category 10 - Encountering a hostile culture**

This Core Category encompasses some emotionally charged statements by students:

*...unwanted and grossly undesirable behaviour which hurts my dignity and creates an intimidating, hostile or humiliating atmosphere for me (Student 67I)*

It is tempting to dismiss these statements as exceptional – one arises within a complaint about racism and victimisation from an overseas student who objected to a room inspection. His complaint was rejected by the University where it was perceived the student was drawing on a discriminatory discourse to secure a positive reaction. Some of the statements are very emotional; students feel that their integrity is being challenged when they question processes (Student 78D) and one student, again harnessing racial discrimination, accuses a member of staff of stating that they have said to them: *will kick your head (sic), shut up and I cannot listen to you. I have no solution for you.* What underlines the prominence of this Core Category is that it is closely aligned to, and could encompass, other Core Categories. University culture from the student experience is hostile from a number of perspectives. Thus in 2008-2009 where there is an absence of any Initial Codes being allocated to the Key Point 16 *Encountering a hostile culture*, other Codes stress the challenges for students attempting to progress routine needs. The core support areas of academic and administrative staff are criticised through the complaints process. One student who is failing a degree writes *...I had problems with my unit lecturer regarding the assignment I had to retake. I made every effort to see that lecturer and she was never in her office during the office hours.* (Student 89P). This might be dismissed as a student exaggeration but Core Category 6 *Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice* reflects occasions on which students struggle to access academic staff (*I tried to get hold of lecturers and markers for help and this was not possible* (Student 67H) and *On numerous I tried to speak with ... but she was never available or in her office, I left messages on the notepad hung on her office door for such matters but received no response* (Student 67C). This unfortunately chimes with a university that has no personal tutor system and no standard process for contacting academic staff.

Complaints within Core Category 15 *Experiencing administrative errors* evidence student frustration at being adversely impacted by administrative inefficiency. Some students miss assessments: *I had spoken to my faculty on many occasions ...they had looked at my file many times and never informed me that I was due to retake at an earlier date* (Student 78M) or they have handed in assessments that are subsequently mislaid: *...I have since found out that I was given the wrong xxx assignment by the xxx office which was sent to me by post. This is not the first time the xxx office has made a mistake. They also misplaced my first assignment which meant I had to redo it and they also made a transcript error in the recording of my results stating that I had not passed the presentation...* (Student 78Q).

Allied to this students in the sample have a great sense of injustice. Core Category 7 *Being subject to unfair treatment* records examples of students feeling they have been treated badly. In some instances this involves a perception of the fairness of academic judgement in marking e.g. on the basis that *It seemed apparent that the tutor's personal preferences dictated the merit of my work...* (Student 78AA).

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Taken together with the disadvantages felt by international students (Core Category1) and some of the concerns expressed by students about the complaint process itself there is a picture not simply of an culture that is unsupportive but one in which students have to battle through on a regular basis dependent on how many of these issues they are subject to at any one time

The structuring of the student experience as one of alienation has already been explored; Mann (2001) evokes the spirit of student complaint as expressed by students in their written submissions:

*Most students entering the new world of the academy are in an equivalent position to those crossing the borders of a new country – they have to deal with the bureaucracy of checkpoints, or matriculation, they may have limited knowledge of the local language and customs, and are alone. Furthermore, the student's position is akin to the colonised or the migrant from the colonised land, where the experience of alienation arises from being in a place where those in power have the potential to impose their particular ways of perceiving and understanding the world – in other words, a kind of colonising process*

(Mann, 2001, p.11)

If this is reality to the student then their persistence with the complaint journey is noteworthy and research should determine the motivators in the face of apparent adverse conditions. Is this a measure of their personal investment in their education or, a model replicating consumer complaint behaviour (Crie, 2003) where the initial dissatisfaction has been compounded by other institutional activity to the extent that there is a very strong motivation to address what might initially have been a minor issue?

The issues raised here will not be explored by direct questions through interviews but it will be important to reflect on this during completion of later data analysis to consider how these drive the complaint process and shape student behaviour.

### References

Crie, D. (2003) 'Consumers' complaint behaviour, taxonomy, typology and determinants: towards a unified ontology' in *Journal of Database Marketing and Customer Strategy Management*, vol. 11 no. 1, pp.60-79 ABI/INFORM

Mann, S.J. (2001) 'Alternative perspectives on the student experience: alienation and engagement' in *Studies in Higher Education*, vol.26, no.1 pp.7-19 [online], <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070020030689>, (Accessed 20 April 2012)

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 1 - Being disadvantaged as an International Student**

The profile of the student body at Riverside notes that 9.4% of all full-time students are international students; these are non-EEA students. It is often difficult to isolate these students aside from their fee category where they attract a premium fee; in terms of data analysis care with student status! Nationality and ethnicity may not be clearly stated. Non-UK EEA students may have the same cultural challenges as international students and contribute to the ethnicity mix but are not researched as a separate student group in the complaints arena. Riverside's complainant study body mirrors the OIA statistics which record an overrepresentation of international students in complaints (22% in 2010).

Not all international students allude to their status in their appeals, where they do they will refer to themselves as 'international or foreign'. The category of international rather than foreign is retained to highlight that non-UK EEA students are excluded. The latter is a legitimate research grouping since all non-UK students will have cultural adjustment issues relating to studying in a foreign country. However the small research base to date on student complaints has been focused to international students in the sense of international only and not EEA. Research by Hart and Coates (2010) and Su and Bao (2001) is relevant. The international aspect is therefore retained as an independent core category because it has been relevant to research to date, is identified across via key point coding across all years and has indications of links to EC categories which identify cultural issues.

Of the two international students in 2009-2010, one is exceptional in that it accuses a member of academic staff of racial discrimination. This is a particularly aggressive attack by the student and appears to result from the student being failed in the unit which the lecturer taught. The student is also being required to return home due to visa issues and is not going to achieve their award. The student is concerned about the parental view where the father has paid a substantial amount of fees. The second student also raises discrimination but oddly discrimination in their perception of the way that international students are treated with some being given fairer treatment although it is not specified. This student was being given an exit award. Raising discrimination is exceptional but is nevertheless reflected in the category characteristics; the focus for the student is the disrespect for the family that failure will bring which is a common concern. Su and Bao (2001) conclude that international students are unlikely to be aggressive complainers due to their perception of the power relationship dominated by the academic. But international complainers in the Riverside sample readily overcome any cultural power perceptions to be more aggressive than their counterparts. The student raising racial discrimination at para (3) above wrote: *'I do not want to blame my teacher ever, as I have been told since childhood that teachers have greater respect than parents, I have always addressed her 'Respected Teacher' but now there is a matter of my career and whole life and I am being discriminated badly there for (sic) I am begging for justice only.'* (Student 90H)

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Cultural resistance to complaining occurs at the point the student is starting to fail academically, either at individual assessment, unit or award level. The adverse academic impact is critical. This chimes with prior recent research (Hart & Coates, 2010) with South East Asian students which concludes that their cultural values make them uncomfortable in a complaint scenario, they do not view themselves as consumers but will complain where the student experience does not meet expectations. In terms of complaint behaviour, students cannot talk to family and will talk to other students. Here, international students' ethnic, cultural norms are such that students cannot discuss problems with family: family are paying the tuition fees and would be distressed or the source of discontent is the family. Noting that one student complains that the university does not provide enough support, it could be that the university may need to re-assess support for international and wider cultural issues – not simply international or non-UK. This would have to encompass the cultural needs of international/EEA and UK ethnic minority students.

Harts and Coates (2010) research notes that students have other issues particularly concern that complaints will result in the student being discriminated against in the marking process. This may not be a purely international concern. However the indicators here are that research should consider not just international concerns but cultural support in its widest sense. Given the dominance of ethnicity in the student complainant profile, cultural awareness should be high profile when Riverside considers student complaints. *This has been cross-referenced with the core category of e.g. Experiencing Extenuating Circumstances and Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail where cultural matters have been challenging and provision is made to explore cultural matters via student interviews.*

Given the message from Riverside's international students' complaint submissions that they are 'disadvantaged' – need to be alert to similar theme in student interviews assuming international students respond – explore how students feel about support available. But not within initial question framework?

### *References:*

Hart, D.J. and Coates, N.F. (2010) 'International student complaint behaviour: how do East Asian students complain to their university?' *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol.34, no. 3, pp. 303-319.

Su, C. and Bao, Y. (2001) 'Student Complaint Behaviour Based on Power Perception: A Taxonomy', *Services Marketing Quarterly*, vol. 22 no.3 p.45 [online], <http://libezproxy2.open.ac.uk.libezproxy.open.ac.ukurl=http://search.ebscohost.com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk> (accessed 25 August 2011) (Accessed 18 September 2011).

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 5 - Expressing Dissatisfaction with the complaint process**

One student rather logically wonders why the University makes provision for complaints in specific circumstances but then fails to consider them:

*The appeals form for candidates to appeal have specific sections for after assessment circumstances, so it appears absurd that such circumstance will never be taken on board or considered by the university* (Student 90Q)

Is this similar to the transactional approach exemplified by Core Category 'The Deal.' I have done what you asked me to do and therefore I should get the specified outcome? I submitted my complaint in the way you expect – so my complaint should have been accepted.

One student, reflecting on a number of issues in his complaint indicates his perception of the University's attitude to complaints:

*"I do get the distinct feeling that the university does not want to learn about 'issues' from students which is a shame because at the same time I am sure the University wishes to improve. It is almost as if the University does not want to acknowledge that it can be at fault. Processes/procedures – lengthy complicated documents that are put in place by the University to ensure quality standards are fine, but please appreciate that the average student would not read them and they are quite complicated.* (Student 90U)

Yet student suspicion of the University is initially articulated by dissatisfaction with the complaint process as experienced at faculty level. Some are still hopeful that university level staff will be more helpful:

*The problem is that precisely because I have lost faith in the department, I feel that it is necessary to appeal to the University itself in order to ascertain a more objective point of view. Whatever the universities (sic) decision may be, it is hoped that this will at least give me a sense of closure upon the subject matter.* (Student 78AA)

Do students have no expectations that the faculty will support them because the faculty was responsible for the complaint issue in the first instance? How do we articulate this in terms of student complaint behaviour? The experience of the complaint itself drives lack of faith in the complaint process and that those considering the complaint will do nothing? Matches here with consumer literature. Disenchantment in the experience means disenchantment with the whole experience; is education such a people orientated product that all staff associated are impacted? Unlike consumer complaint behaviour where problems with the product are not linked so closely to the company? Attitude of staff in the university is critical. HE attitude to complaints is not good enough so the moment a student is unhappy they get no help – so have to complain formally and in doing so expect nothing because they have had nothing to date? A further reflection of 'Encountering a hostile culture.'

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This may also be why students do not challenge decisions of the University when the University makes a final response. There is no evidence on student files that students are not happy with the outcome, noting that in most instances student appeals are not successful.

Student 78AA mentions concerns about the impact on his academic progress of raising a complaint:

*I said at the time that I would like a second opinion but stupidly and I regret this very much, I did not push for fear of upsetting her and the department.* (Student 78AA)

This comes at a point when the student has clearly tackled the tutor publicly and it could be questionable how far this concern is genuine. Is this evidence of a power discourse and links to other core categories e.g. CC10 Encountering a hostile Culture. Here possibly not – the student notes that he asked the academic for a second opinion but did not pursue. Within the full context of the complaint submission this student's narrative reads more of a quite proactive student whose approach is more aligned with conceptual Core Category 13 – Challenging the University.

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 6 - Being disadvantaged by academic bad practice**

Terminology was considered carefully – ‘poor academic practice’ may have read better but as described by students the academic input is much worse than simply poor. It is bad. Also more than merely experiencing bad practice – complainants perceive they are disadvantaged. One student complains that the opportunity for presentation of work and academic feedback is simply an opportunity for *vitriolic personal diatribes from the tutors*. (Student 67C)

Difficulties obtaining access to academic tutors is a common theme. Not only on an ad hoc basis to respond to queries but also with supervision where tutor workload and hence availability is perceived to be problematic. Students do not mention email as an acceptable alternative. Note here that Riverside no longer has personal tutors for students.

Students are very surprised where academic staff are not aware of regulations or procedural requirements: *However no-one really understood the regulations and some were saying I could do the assignment if I wanted to whilst others were saying I couldn't* (Student 78F). They expect their academic staff to provide guidance and to tell them what to do when. Expectations of academic staff may be an important concept. Due to annual changes in regulations, policies and procedures, Riverside academic staff are expected to encourage students to check procedural matters with faculty administrative staff. Academics are discouraged from advising students due to the number of occasions that students are incorrectly advised. But from a student perspective is it not reasonable to expect your academic tutors to know academic regulations?

Are students afraid to complain about bad practice? There is some evidence of this: *I felt that if I 'rocked the boat' and upset the department that this could go against me in the future with regard to getting help, grading, references etc.'*

It is important to note that the bad practice is particular to certain members of staff and units where staff are perceived to not lay on the tutorials required by the unit brief or not to apply the marking scheme appropriately. It is a targeted message not a general criticism of delivery across the university.

How far is the student's perception of bad academic practice influenced by issues raised under NB OTHER CORE CATEGORIES CC7 (*Being subject to unfair treatment*), CC18 (*Experiencing Mental Health Problems*), CCC10 (*Encountering a hostile culture*) or CC14 (*Deserving better outcomes*).

Behaviour as stated in complaints is in some cases absolutely unacceptable. But is it fair? Is this an interpretation by the student? Difficulty accessing academic staff occurs frequently? Do students expect staff to be available 24/7 via email? How far have students adapted to independent learning? Do students expect to accept criticism as feedback? What is reality here? Does Riverside do anything to manage expectations? These issues are

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important - this may get to the heart of what students expect from academic staff and to the nature of the relationship between 'the student' and 'the University' not just at local but potentially at HE sector level?

**Linkage to Core Categories 'Experiencing poor communications' / 'Tell me what to do'/'The Deal'** Students – whatever age group? – remain highly dependent on academic staff but academic staff are stretched with big classes and are striving to cope – and keep their distance from students? Thus students are waiting to be told what to do but academics communicate badly and can provide a poor service resulting in what – particularly to new students – must be a hostile environment to study in.

What are perceptions of staff/academic tutor relations from the student perspective – are staff supportive or are they very much responsible for Conceptual Core Category 10 '*Encountering a hostile culture*'?

*Issues for interviews:*

*What emerges about relationships with academic staff? For example, are staff available to offer support when needed – what is student's view of staff in terms of providing academic and pastoral support?*

This issue may arise under a separate category but it is important to establish how students felt about complaining – were they reluctant/afraid to do so?

*Tell me how comfortable you felt about raising a complaint? NB – rephrase this – leading!!*



### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 7 - Being subject to unfair treatment**

Perceptions of fairness can be related to the nature of the final award. Where academic expectations are not met the student believes there is unfairness:

*The notified result does not properly reflect the considerable hard work and effort put in over the year....given the circumstances I therefore feel that the award of an unclassified degree is grossly unfair.*

Students do not articulate unfairness in a personal way – it is perceived to be at a corporate level:

*..I will finish my degree feeling that the University has served me most unfairly* (Student 90N)

One student challenges the University's regulations as not being fair – highlighting a factor that was eventually to be formally recognised by the University with a change of regulations. The argument is clear and the student is rational and polite. The student's appeal succeeds but only as a result of an incorrect process applied during the appeal process and not because the University recognised the issue raised by the student.

Students perceive as unfair issues which stop them achieving – one student states that it is 'unfair and unreasonable' that he cannot continue on to the next level of the course because the regulations do not allow him to do so with the amount of failures he has. However he does in fact pick up a point that University staff are now appreciating that a past failure cannot be rectified and has little bearing on current performance.

Again a master's unit perceived unfairness in relation to the regulations applied to undergraduate students. The university response states the obvious by simply confirming it. This does nothing to alleviate the perceptions of unfairness.

Students argue that it ....*is not a fair judgement* (Student 90S) where they are prevented from doing something by the assessment regulations.

One student who has had extensive problems has been unable to pass enough units to progress to the final level and raises a number of reasons why they could manage the additional workload as well as moving in to their final year. Whilst acknowledging that personal problems impacted heavily and prevented a good performance the student is nevertheless driven to blame the university for their position and quite aggressively:

*I will not stop fighting for this appeal and I will do whatever it takes to continue my third year, as I feel I have been unfairly treated by the university.* (Student 89W)

It is worth wondering why the students feel so unfairly treated. Unfair treatment is seen as being within the arena of assessment outcomes. On the whole students must have known their academic progress was not good; they show an awareness of that when explaining why they are requesting favourable treatment. Is this simply because students really have no idea of the regulations – therefore linked to Core Category 12: *Experiencing poor*

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*communications?* If the students had an appreciation of the assessment regulations they would be aware that academic failure would be result in inability to progress or a poor classification. Students seem to be blindsided by being given an outcome which seems to be a genuine surprise to them. Why are students so unaware of the regulations? There are shades here of transactional expectations – I have done what you told me, made the adjustments you told me to – and yet I do not get the mark that I was trying to secure.

In this instance student complaint behaviour is influenced by unrealistic expectations – unrealistic expectations are something that Riverside should be able to manage in some way.

Students have a suspicious view of academic staff – why – poor relations, poor culture from the students' perspective?

Student 78X: *I also believe that all the units are marked in favour to who the tutors like. I don't think that any of the units should be marked by any of our tutors that teach us. It should be marked by someone else who doesn't know us as a group to make it fair on the marking. All work handed in shows all our names.*

Is unfairness linked to assessment only – or is it a wider perception of staff v student hostility which is endemic? Note links to CC6/CCC10.

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 15 - Experiencing administrative errors**

Admin errors do cause traumas for students. In one appeal a student is concerned about his apparent failure in group work. As part of the review of that it was discovered that two sets of marks had been set against the wrong elements. The University apologised but this somehow did not seem enough given the impact on the student:

*Please I earnestly plead in frustration that you come to my rescue in this matter because am presently traumatised by this eventuality at the last few days of my programme” (Student 90J)*

Students can be accepting of administrative errors:

*However when they sent the work to retake, they only sent me Economics assignment but the finance was not sent. (Student 78P)*

They also accept human error and that this can happen on both sides and therefore the university should be sympathetic. In the circumstances of the student being disadvantaged this seems more than reasonable:

*Surely there is room for human error on part of xxxxxxxxx University staff and error on my part for not noticing the mistake immediately...there has been an oversight on both sides and I therefore wish you to consider this appeal. (Student 89B)*

What is most apparent in all of this is that errors from administrative staff's perspective would be perceived to be routine and easily done – forgetting to put something in an envelope or transposing a figure whilst typing in marks. Yet the outcome is totally disproportionate and can be devastating for the student. The University then lays emphasis on the student having to spot the error and be proactive about addressing it. At minimum there should be more recognition of the devastation that can be caused and apologies should not be glossed over as they currently are. To be fair, in some cases the student is permitted the opportunity to do an assessment again.

What is mostly questionable is that the University never states to the student what action is being taken to minimise opportunity for the error to happen again - in any other organisation that might be considered a standard expectation. Riverside focuses on the student's failure to address the error not on the institution's joint failure in being responsible for the error and then not addressing the circumstances as a preventative action.

NB. Importance of service marketing emphasis on customer after care – not during the complaint as per double/triple deviation but follow-up – Gruber et al on role of employees to keep customers happy with aftercare etc. Is this relevant to behaviour though? Only if failure to advise remedial action influences further complaints. Are students serial complainants?

*Need to find out outcomes from interviewees, if they got what they want and if they complained more than once.*

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Conceptual Core Category 16 - 'Tell me what to do!'**

*I accept that the faculty made efforts electronically and visually to inform me that I should complete the work. However I submit that a verbal sentence of maybe 3 words from my tutor could have saved my university career.....surely a tutor could have said "X....look at the board!) That's ALL it would have taken....I am very disappointed that such a simple administrative mistake on my part can lead to such devastating consequences*

(Student 78C).

Students' expectations of university culture are in direct opposition to that of the University. University policy expects students to be proactive – loads them with information during induction – and expects them to find out what they need to know. The virtual student cry of 'Tell me what to do' embraces all the issues identified in Core Category 12 *Experiencing Poor Communications*. The two are closely linked – the issue is that the student wants to be given advice – and on top of that the advice must be accurate.

The link with extenuating circumstances is reflective of the same approach by Riverside. In introducing a 'fit to sit' attitude the institution is clear the student makes the decision about taking an exam and determining what is in their best interests. Yet the EC policy is becoming complex with the introduction of extensions and where a student has to 'gamble' on having the appropriate evidence and obtaining a sympathetic decision or they may fail the assessment. Once again the institutional wish for the student to be proactive is not appreciated by students:

*Extenuating circumstances are there to protect students with problems. I have severe problems yet you have currently offered no solutions, only defences of your policies and academic integrity. I am looking for assistance. I am asking for help not an argument on the finer points of your policies.*

(Student 78O).

This category is conceptual in also encompassing Core Category 8 (Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail). The link here is that students with sometimes highly personal issues are looking to the University for a Solution for the first time in complaining – they are not challenging previous EC submissions. The complainant accepts their role in the poor academic outcome that has prompted the complaint itself but expects the University to sort the issue out. This attitude is also mirrored in CC2 'Submitting a deferential complaint'. Although the pacifist nature of the latter core category is potentially reflective of student concern about the power of the university in terms of any subsequent reflection of displeasure, students are still expecting the University to resolve issues and 'tell me what to do':

*Please kindly look in to these matters of mine as it will be very helpful for me to get my degree or at least to get a diploma, which values a lot than a certificate.* (Student 78H)

Is Conceptual Core Category 16 indicative of the dependency of the student/university relationship? Rather than independence which the university expects its students to achieve,

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do students arrive with an expectation of support that might later disappoint them and how far is the university responsible for this image? OR is this simply a reflection of what might be considered the traditional and obvious imbalance in the balance of power between the weight of the university and the helplessness of the student. Is 'Tell me what to do' simply another extension of that?

Are Riverside's complainants particularly needy?

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 2 - submitting a deferential complaint**

Key Point 2, 'Submitting a deferential complaint', reflects the rather submissive approach taken by some student complainants. Despite dissatisfaction that has driven them to pursue a complaint to university level, these complaints are still peppered with deferential phraseology.

An overseas student facing loss of Masters due to debt and not being able to access results writes quite simply: *Please kindly look in to these matters of mine as it will be very helpful for me to get my degree or at least to get a diploma, which values a lot than a certificate.*"(Student 78H)

One UK student who feels she is being punished for the adverse circumstances that happened to her nevertheless takes a pacifist approach *I would be very grateful if you could appreciate the difficulties I faced... and I would very much appreciate that you defer this work ...*" (Student 67T).

Possible issues here have been thrown up by the early literature review:

- Cultural issues around overseas students
- Power differential
- 

The first round of 27 Key Point Codes in 2006-2007 represents 20 students. Note that of these 15 are EEA students: of the EEA students, all are UK nationality but 7 are of ethnic minority, 4 specifying Asian.

Gruber et al's (2009) conclusions confirm that cultural issues are a factor for dispute resolution. Harris (2007) in a survey response from over 25 UK universities established that ethnic minority students are also over represented in complaints submissions but was unable to assess if this encompassed overseas students due to the lack of robustness by most universities in recording complaints information

The impact of the power imbalance between student and university is important; Su and Bao's (2001) study indicates that 'Voicers' (students who submit formal complaints) are the smallest group of the dissatisfied students. The largest group are those that take no formal action but complain to peer colleagues. These students, are sensitive to the positional power of university staff and feel unable to articulate their complaint. Students in this sample have pursued their complaints but this may be reflective of the work of Hart and Coates (2010) researching a small group of East Asian students in a UK University. They report that whilst historically Asian students have viewed themselves primarily as students, reluctant to complain due to the belief it will impact their grades, their tipping point is when they believe teaching is compromised. This is a core issue for their role as students and triggered by high and unrealistic expectations about contact hours in the UK higher education system. Asian students are unwilling consumers, complain reluctantly and only then where facilitated by email which provides a less confrontational vehicle.

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A significant ethnic grouping in this sample is Asian but of Pakistani grouping both overseas and in the UK. However they reflect the submissive approach identified by Hart and Coates and a recognition of the perceived power and authority of the teacher figure:

*...I don't want to blame my teacher ever, as I have been told since from childhood that children have greater respects that (sic) parents, I always addressed her 'respected teacher' but now there is matter of my career and whole life, and I am being discriminated badly there for I am begging for justice only."* (Student 90H)

An overseas students who is very displeased about receiving a fail mark softens his complaint by adding: *Regarding to my educational period in (Riverside) University, I have to say that, I had no problems with my classmates or any tutors. Besides, I enjoyed my course and improved my skills since the beginning of the course"* (Student 89W) but he does also say *"...as a foreign student, I do not deserve to get a fail mark and certainly think about carrying out this issue to student organisations, institutions, press and media...and inform them about my situation"*

From an international student who persisted to the OIA *With due respect I want to let you know that I have submitted an appeal.....* (Student 90AA)

This is either embedded culturally or a belief that the University will abuse its position and reflect displeasure about the complaint in the marking system.

Mukherjee et al (2009) note that students react positively to power perceptions of staff based on their subject expertise and do not respond to staff who they perceive as using reward power i.e. through marking standards, which they perceive to be some form of punishment. Where they respect staff they will discuss matters with them and it is to the benefit of resolution that students are encouraged to engage in dialogue.

Must explore the student perceptions here: have they ever felt intimidated about submitting a complaint and has anything in the university process contributed to this? This has to be explored in order to improve the complaint experience. Is reward and punishment power a reality for students? Is there a differential for overseas and UK students. Is power a perceived issue for all and are there other cultural issues for overseas students e.g. there is an argument (Nkemleke, 2004) that deferential written submissions reflect the way some overseas students are taught to write – flattering and emotional as a result of some colonial legacy - and is not necessarily reflective of the student's response to any perception of power relations. Interviews should explore our student complainants' views here:

*Did you have any thoughts about what the reaction of university staff might be when you submitted your complaint?" - too focused?? Something around the issues of submitting a complaint generally to pick up any other actors?*

Gruber, T., Szmigin, I. and Voss, R. (2009) 'Handling customer complaints effectively: A comparison of the value maps of female and male complainants' *Managing Service Quality*, vol. 19, no. 6 [online], DOI 10.1108/09604520911005044 (Accessed 5 September 2011).

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- Mukherjee, A., Pinto, M.B. and Malhotra, N. (2009) 'Power perceptions and modes of complaining in higher education' *The Service Industries Journal* no. 29, vol.11, 1615-1633.
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- Su, C. and Bao, Y. (2001) 'Student Complaint Behaviour Based on Power Perception: A Taxonomy', *Services Marketing Quarterly*, vol. 22 no 3, p.45 [online], <http://libezproxy2.open.ac.uk/libezproxy.open.ac.ukurl=http://search.ebscohost.com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk>, (Accessed 10 September 2010).



### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 3 - Experiencing an Extenuating Circumstance (EC)**

Note that this category is primarily where the student has decided not to submit an EC application during the course of their studies. EC issues raised by students are what could be termed 'traditional matters' encompassed within the EC policy: short term illness and death of a family member. Note that this category encompasses the second highest trigger for student complaints – students complain because their assessment has been affected by their failure to submit EC or for it to be accepted. See also **Theoretical Memorandum: Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail** which addresses EC issues also but where the matters raised are exceptionally challenging and disclosed in a non-challenging very open way.

The student sometimes states why they have not previously made an EC submission:

- i. concern that they might not get EC 'approved' by the panel and then get zero for a non-submission;
- ii. not being in a state to think about university procedures.

Note that students do not always think about the appeal policy and the requirement of that policy that they need to explain why they did not submit EC in the first place.

How does this sit with the emergent category 'hostile environment'? Is this another reflection of the hostility of the environment – though note this has been restricted to the academic environment and EC issues touch on broader matters.

In addition to cultural matters where students do not initially feel able to disclose issues do students also feel unable to discuss matters with staff in the first instance as they are continually advised to do? Why do they not ask to see the Student Support Officer which is the post advertised heavily at Riverside as being the person to see in the faculty for support and guidance?

The EC policy was revised in the year prior to the research period; EC is now short-term and evidence based. The 'Fit to sit' principle is now being taken up by sector. Backed by other initiatives for longer term illness. Too complex now? Is the University deemed to be unsympathetic? A reminder of the comment from Student 78O:

*Extenuating circumstances are there to protect students with problems. I have severe problems yet you have currently offered no solutions, only defences of your policies and academic integrity. I am looking for assistance. I am asking for help not an argument on the finer points of your policies.*

Complaining students deem the Riverside approach to be harsh. They do not think it necessary to justify their illness: "...do not punish me for my misfortunes." (Student 67T)

Note that the EC policy puts the responsibility on the student to decide if they are ill or not – the student must be proactive. But is the student's expectation that they should be directed at all times? The University should recognise the illness and take appropriate action. Is this part of the ethos of delivering what the student needs to know at the time they need to know it? Is 'The Deal' that it is University responsibility to ensure the student is best placed to study and do well – the student waves they have a problem and the University responds? I am ill – that is it – I am blameless, it is your (university) fault if my studies suffer as a result?

Is EC used or elaborated to garner sympathy? In most cases the EC issue is evidenced as real. Only one student (Student 67S) quotes extensive EC issues at the faculty level appeal but does not mention any EC detail at the University level. Is this the use of differing tactics to get results or a view that the University is not sympathetic?

### *Ethnicity as a factor*

Student complainants evidence a range of significant personal issues, sometimes multiple for a single student. Is this reflective of increased diversity in the student body and an inflexible EC policy that does not recognise the changing nature of the student body?

Note that one in five students at Riverside are from ethnic minority backgrounds. The ethnic profile of complainants, including students with an overseas status, are over-represented, noting in particular that in 2009-2010 58% of complainants are of an ethnic minority. But the latter is due to complaints coming in large part from a single programme (MBA) dominated by foreign students and of the complaint sample fewer students claimed to be disadvantaged by their personal status:

In 2006-2007 of the 20 complainants in the year 10 had a declared ethnicity (using HESA terminology) outside of White, of those 3 students alluded to the disadvantages of being from a non-UK culture.

In 2007-2008 of the 28 complaints in the year only 6 students classified themselves as being non-white, 7 students refused to indicate ethnicity or were returned as not known. 2 students used ethnicity issues as part of their complaint.

In 2008-2009 of the 26 complainants in the year only 8 students classified themselves as being non-white, with 3 refused or not known. 5 of those students used ethnicity issues as part of their complaint.

In 2009-2010 of the 17 complainants in the year 9 students were of an ethnic minority, two students allude to ethnicity issues as part of their appeal

However given the dominance of ethnic minority students in the complaint sample it would be relevant to explore the needs of those students and whether additional support measures could avoid those students starting the complaints journey.

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*Issues to potentially explore at interviews:*

*Why students feel unable to advise the university at the point they experience problems*

*Any issue or impact from the University's extenuating circumstances policy and procedures.*

*Need for the university to put in place any additional measures to support students experiencing challenges associated with their cultural background?*

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 8 - Disclosing personal circumstances in intimate detail**

This is closely aligned to extenuating circumstances but is separated and characterised by the devastating nature of the issues raised for the first time and which are given in great detail. It can be difficult to comprehend how any single generally young person has managed to survive. One student advises the family issues of suffering a late abortion and then on the anniversary of the child's death has been attacked outside of their home. Another has had an extremely serious road traffic accident and has struggled to get in to college each day on crutches. Another details the breakdown of ethnic family values, inter-family fighting family, abuse, financial bankruptcy, police arrests and resisting forced marriage. Some have had ongoing serious heart problems. Students in these circumstances suffer multiple significant events that they have not previously sought help for. All events are evidenced with the exception of narratives regarding family conflict.

These students are looking to the University for a solution for the first time – they are not challenging previous EC submissions. The complainant accepts their role in the poor academic outcome that has prompted the complaint itself.

What has *motivated* students to continue studying in the face of such adversity? University advice would be for the student to suspend studies until major life matters had been resolved, this being in the best academic interest of the student.

Why did it not occur to the student to seek help? As with EC based complaints, is there a link to other key points of *Encountering a hostile culture or Experiencing poor communications* (was the student aware of the support mechanisms open to them)?

In terms of student complaint behaviour we need to determine why students are reluctant to suspend their studies and what was their motivation to carry on and ultimately put themselves in a complaint scenario.

Note here that it is only at the point of significant academic failure that they think to alert staff to their issues – on basis they think they could manage – or simply realisation there is no hope academically. Can Riverside handle all of this??

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 12 - Experiencing poor communications**

Student frustration pours off the page.

At a routine level student complainants see communication methods as poor. One disabled student remarks that part of the general approach to communication – conventionally via a notice board – does not serve any student well: *“Any information regarding the course that needed to be obtained quickly (i.e. the rescheduling or the relocation of lectures and seminars) could only be found amongst the disorganised mass of papers on the notice board.”* (Student89D).

One student (67M) on a postgraduate course notes *‘There has been a complete breakdown in communications between the ....School and the (course) continuing students.’* This followed a change in course leader which indicates that, in a system which no longer offers a personal tutor system, debriefing and guidance to students is only as good as the course leader chooses to make it and course leaders have a considerable remit. The student also notes dissatisfaction with informal communications via email which she observes can be misconstrued; she notes with regret the demise of formal notifications which had been a feature of the previous course leadership. The subsequent lack of overview, combined with individual academic members of staff ignorance of course and university regulations combined to leave the student in a fog of confusion and to submit a very lengthy complaint focusing on the poor standard of communications with students.

Most worryingly, from the student perspective communication failures are responsible for blighting their academic future, on occasion having to discontinue their studies.

Student 89U recalls being told to check the student portal to find out information regarding the completion of an assessment that was critical to improving their chances of getting a higher degree classification. No information is forthcoming so she contacts the faculty office again and is told to keep checking. No information is available throughout the first semester. Two weeks in to the second semester she queries again and is advised that faculty staff cannot find any information on the particular unit either. She is directed to the head of the faculty who advises she should in fact have completed the outstanding assessment in the first semester. Her ability to achieve a good degree is affected by a communication vacuum.

In the following year Student 90D complains about his removal from course on academic failure following what he perceives to be confusion about the nature of what he submitted. He believes he has submitted in accordance with the assessment brief and is shocked by the impact of finding that he has not; the student has expectations that he would have been contacted given that the ramifications of failing the assessment were extremely serious: *In the intervening months...no-one from the course contacted me to inform me that the university was assuming that I had sent in only one piece of work....I would not knowingly throw away this opportunity for personal development and advancement.*

Student 78A does not understanding the need to take outstanding deficit units and is facing an Unclassified degree; on the same issue another student writes: *Throughout the whole of*

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*the year, I never received any correspondence in relation to this project, or any notification when such work had to be handed. In the same year Student 78M claims to be unaware of the requirement to retake a unit and complains that I understand I am responsible for my studies but I never received any informative advice about the one part of the unit as other student would have. One student having received zero for a failed submission has expectations that the University should make attempts to contact students:*

*At this crucial stage of my degree if the tutor knew something was wrong why not write a note to home and/or phone my mobile? I have always received correspondence at my home address and I always have my mobile with me....I would like to plead with you that, especially in a final year, more effort is made to contact students if there are any concerns which could affect their degree classification.” (Student78V)*

Communication is a key issue for student complainants but how far is there a mismatch of expectations between Riverside and its students? Complaints highlight the dependency of some students and that some students expect a tailored service. Are student expectations realistic in a mass higher education system where numbers of students preclude a personalised approach? Should student expectations be better managed so all students know they have to find and interpret information – assuming the information is available in a timely way to be interpreted? Complainants expect to be helped : *The course objectives state that the university is there to help students develop their potential. Unfortunately this would not appear to be the case with me. Student90D).*

Since the outcome of any misunderstanding for the complainant as evidenced in the sample being researched has significant adverse consequences, a recommendation that Riverside reviews the way in which it conveys key information to its students may be appropriate.

*Issues to be determined/explored and considered as recommendations to improve practice:*

*The university has a lot of important information that students need to know – what is the best way of ensuring students have access to this information and understand it?*

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 18 - Experiencing Mental health issues**

This could be significant since mental health provision is a rising need (Morrison and Connor, 2005) – challenges for practitioners in encompassing mental health issues in to standard provision. How far does this category reveal real mental health problems – or general claims of stress? Are there links to EC (KP3) and disclosing personal circumstances (KP9) in intimate detail?

What are students claiming?

#### **2006-2007**

One of the students in this academic year interviewed (Student 67G) – genuine mental health issues with recognised disability support- has used this for suspension from course. Absence could not continue course – eventually ended up with distance learning – no apparent account taken of ability to learn on such an independent basis. Experience exacerbated mental health problems. A highly vulnerable student.

Other students claim stress and depression which is not formally diagnosed under mental health but the circumstances exceed normal stress levels given course pressures etc.:

Student 67D claiming stress – but 8 months pregnant with unplanned pregnancy and trying to do exams. Temporary – but extreme mental pressure

International Student 67K claiming stressful period due to death in family and returning to home country for traditional mourning – alongside heavy resit work to be submitted. Student unable to cope for a limited period and looking for recognition of that/support.

Student 67T details very poor family relations, historical and ongoing debt, working excessive hours and failing degree – claiming extreme depression but not sought counselling and evidence required for any EC support. Any one of those incidences would generate depression. Strong link with EC codes and disclosing personal circumstances and tells story of challenging lifestyles – how do students study against this background. How does this drive complaint behaviour?? Failure is the straw that breaks the camel's back? Challenges are manageable/worth it as long as they achieve their degree??

#### **2007-2008**

Student 78E uses stress casually and in relation to normal workload issues. Another student has family intervention in his appeal to confirm a serious mental health problem following a breakdown and which it is argued impacted on the student's ability to follow normal assessment procedures. The mental health issues are registered with the university's services.

### 2008-2009

A third student – an interviewee – has to leave her course at one stage following a violent attack and undergoes counselling before returning to complete her final year. She suffers another domestic incident which puts her in to emergency counselling. She seeks EC to recognise impact on work but this is not recognised as she had submitted the work (declared ‘fit to sit’) and so student remains on a lower classification average.

An overseas student struggles to adjust to new environment, plagiarises work unintentionally and is stressed by heavy workload on resits. Outlines extreme pressure due to deadlines but does not seek medical help. Picture of temporary position but nevertheless in common with other students this is very stressful and by virtue of that it becomes a mental health issue temporarily.

An appeal in this year also comes from a girl suffering extreme anxiety disorder and under treatment from her doctor. Fails EC application as a long term issue - so now submitting as an appeal.

### 2009-2010

A student who is in the interview sample, advises of the mental pressure on him due to perceived racial discrimination by an academic – has failed their unit for the final time. Has seeks medical advice and told to rest due to the situation.

An overseas student (Student 90K) complaining about final assessments which means he has failed the course – claims to be traumatised by the experience but gives no evidence.

A student who cannot progress (Student 90O) seeks deferrals due to EC – did not take exams due to financial hardship and wants to take them again. Unemployed and advises his situation is extremely stressful.

How does this sit with the emergent category *hostile environment*? Is this another reflection of the hostility of the environment – though note this has been restricted to the academic environment and EC issues touch on broader matters. Issue here is that issues are personal to the student – either lifelong health matters or engendered in response to studying – but that students might find the university environment hostile if it does not support them when they are vulnerable. Clear expectations that Riverside should do so?

NB. Focus on behaviour. What do students appear to want and therefore how is this driving behaviour?

Students are seeking recognition of impact on assessments – may be submitting EC though are not overtly doing this. Mental health issues are the ‘excuse’- though to note that these are not on the whole excuse cases – the issues are serious albeit some temporarily so but other students are under long term care with established mental health problems. This is very much part of the EC picture. This is not a separate behavioural pattern. However as with EC this is an issue that arises on the whole from matters external to the university.



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The questions that might arise from this to shed any light on resultant behavioural issues for appeal are already captured within Core Category 3:

*Issues to potentially explore at interviews:*

*Why students feel unable to advise the university at the point they experience problems*

*Any issue or impact from the University's extenuating circumstances policy and procedures.*

*Need for the university to put in place any additional measures to support students*

*Experiencing challenges associated with their mental health background?*

### Reference:

Morrison, R. and O'Connor, R.C. (2005) 'Predicting Psychological Distress in College Students: The Role of Rumination and Stress' *Journal of Clinical Psychology* vo. 61, no. 4, pp.447-460 [online] DOI: 10.1002/jlcp, 20021 (Accessed 24 August 2014).

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Conceptual Core Category 11 - Expecting a qualification by right - 'The Deal'**

The concept of 'The Deal' arose from a single student's statement in 2006-2007:

*....I would be left with a postgraduate Diploma, that wasn't the deal, the deal is a Masters degree (Student67E)*

This became Key Point 19: *Expecting a qualification by right*, encompassed within the concept of 'The Deal'.

Another overseas student who has failed writes in his complaint: *So I am writing this email to help me for attainment of my degree which is my right.* (Student 90H)

What is The Deal for students? Do they have an expectation of the University and where these are not met are complaints a response to a failure to get The Deal?

Is The Deal common or specific to the individual student? The Deal for Student 67E as a foreign student is coming to the UK as a foreign student and paying heavy course and accommodation fees. Fees are an issue – but the fundamental point is the significant upheaval and lifestyle change that seems to warrant the award studied for irrespective of clear academic failure.

Is it transactional but not in a financial sense but in the sense that I as a student do my part of the deal and you do yours – mine is to follow procedures (Key Point 4) and to undertake personal effort (Key Point 36)

You as a University are expected to:

Provide tuition?

Provide a 2.1 classification?

Provide employment?

NB. Pass me.

But you as a University have broken the deal through:

Communicating with me badly

Giving me incorrect advice

Making me subject to academic's bad practice

Failing me

NB: No concept of academic failure/no reference to tuition fees

I will therefore complain as The Deal has not been met.

### **Is there a fundamental linkage to Core Categories 12 and 16 'Experiencing Poor communications' and 'Tell me what to do?'**

The University aims to encourage student independence both in learning and taking decisions: information is delivered online, students are expected to read it – and a lot of policies and procedures – and are then have this quoted at them when they fail to do something they should have done. The University says 'we told you' – the student says there is too much information and you did not tell me at the right time. The student expects to receive the relevant information at the point they need it. Is this part of 'The Deal' for students, whatever age group? They remain highly dependent on academic staff but academic staff are focused to independent learning and the independent student. Students have high IT skills – but not for learning about issues relating to studies. Expectation that this comes from 'the teacher'. This may be the reality of the 'massification' of higher education – dependent learners.

Will student complaint behaviour reveal 'The Deal' and confirm how this influences the nature of the relationship between Riverside and its students – relevance to sector level?

There is a need moving forward to consider students' expectations of the university – what do they think is the responsibility of the university and do they have any reciprocal responsibilities as a student? Issue for student interviews – add to interview questions.

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 13 - Challenging the University**

Irrespective of any potential imbalance in power, student complaints can represent quite a challenging approach to university practice. One student queries his award on the basis of practice at other institutions (*"I am informed by academics working in other universities..."*). The student has not been given the award he thinks he deserves. Another emboldens her response to the feedback she received from the Dean of faculty: *I do not accept this decision – I believe he is mistaken...* Student89V. This student's real argument is about how close she is to a higher classification: *I maintain that the only fair assessment in these circumstances is to give the benefit of the doubt to me, the student, and to award a Second Class Honours (lower division.)*.

Students can be quite verbally aggressive: *Frankly I feel (Dean of faculty) has just swept the issue with my mark under the carpet claiming its mainly based on an academic judgement, which it isn't.....it's just outrageous frankly.* Student 90L. This is associated with just missing a higher classification and looking for more marks.

One student writes a lengthy criticism of issues relating to his course in a complaint that results from his unhappiness about a borderline classification. He writes a range of critical comments about his experiences and finishes by saying:

*I do get the distinct feeling that the university does not want to learn about 'issues' from students which is a shame because at the same time I am sure the University wishes to improve. It is almost as if the University does not want to acknowledge that it can be at fault. Processes/procedures – lengthy complicated documents that are put in place by the University to ensure quality standards are fine, but please appreciate that the average student would not read them and they are quite complicated.*

The student finishes with a statement that his parents will be pursuing matters on his behalf. It is interesting that his criticism in this instance is aimed purely at 'the University' and not a specific individual.

There is no sense of concern by these students about attacking university decisions or of reprisal. None of these students are non-EAA or of ethnic background.

Why are these students being relatively aggressive – in most cases the most aggressive and emotion are all about border line decisions. These students have expectations of getting something which they have not achieved and views about the currency of certain classifications:

One student who provides a reasoned argument for her appeal associated with a lower than anticipated mark for a piece of work mentions her ... *bitter disappointment* with the mark but primarily the concern is about her failure to achieve what she believes to be an appropriate award: *I have been awarded a level that, for me, is disappointing and inhibits my employment opportunities in the current job market, as I am sure you are aware that many employers specify a minimum level of 2:1 to apply for the positions.* Student 78I

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In the same year another Student 78O challenges the integrity of the whole complaints process, opens his complaint by stating: *My aim is for my grade to be adjusted by 1.8% in my favour in order for my classification to be second class (first division).*

Students are influenced by perceptions of the currency of their award – see literature. By introducing opportunity for students to gain higher classifications if they meet certain criteria (within 2% of a higher grade and achieving certain marks) means that students have heightened sense of unfairness when they have not achieved the higher classification band. Allowing some discretion may not be wise.

None of the above students were international or of ethnic origin.

Literature has established that international students complain when their achievement is threatened but that they do so in a deferential way. The non-EAA white students complaining about classifications do take a challenging approach. They indicate some changing view of higher education: *Universities are quickly becoming more of a business and no longer just educational establishments. I feel now I have finished you have little concern.* (Student 78O).

Despite the challenge, prompted by disappointment in expected achievement, the student ultimately just wants help – linking again to core category 16 ‘tell me what to do’

*I am looking for assistance. I am asking for help.....What would you do in my situation? Please help.* (Student78O)

### **Theoretical Memorandum: CC 9 - Involving a third party**

The categories of third party intervention encompass statements about third party evidence, apparent threats to involve external parties and intimidated and proactive involvement by students' parents. The latter are high profile from a practitioner's perspective since students' parents will escalate complaints to the Vice-Chancellor and are key to some student complaint behaviour.

The relevant recent articulation of 'helicopter parents' (White, 2005) has seen an additional pressure on educational institutions generally. The parent who does not 'let go' of their offspring and intervenes in their educational journey is viewed as a 'nuisance' factor by universities in particular. The HEI regards students as adults and does not expect to have to worry about parent power; parents with financial investment would see themselves as having a legitimate reason to intervene in issues impacting their son/daughter progress. How far does the complainant view third party support as of value – do they need it to cope with the perceived power imbalance or is it used as a pressure tool to try and get some action in favour of the student.

NB is there a power imbalance or is reality that the university is doing all it can to please the student consumer?

No more than 6 students in the sample are evidenced giving parents the authority to act on their behalf: *I am writing to give permission for you to speak to my mother (...) about my appeal against the decision of the exam board.* (Student 89O). This in a non-threatening way; the mother is concerned to understand the rationale of an unsuccessful appeal. Others are intervening where the student has had a mental breakdown. One student's parent writing in 2007-2008 at institutional level submits a highly articulate argument evidencing a good understanding of the university's regulations and on the basis his son felt unable to do so. There is no evidence the student advised this – however the student's appeal at faculty level failed and he may have needed the support. This is an additional indicator of how vulnerable some of students are.

Student 89O authorises her parent to act on her behalf when her appeal is starting to fail at institutional level - the parent sends in a very polite note seeking further information. The student has attempted to do everything themselves and pull s in their parent in a non-aggressive way when they are not managing on their own. So some students are using third parties in a support non-aggressive way.

Other students use third parties as more of threat:

Student 90U finishes his appeal with a statement that his parents will take up where he has left off – he alludes to the investment in education which may be a parental burden:

*..you may well be contacted by either my mother or father in the future as they are not best pleased at what has happened and may wish to progress further outside of the University procedures. Attending university is a large investment by any standards a comment mentioned frequently at the graduation ceremony. Please accept this letter as formal*

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*permission by me for either of my parents to communicate with the University on my behalf and act in any manner they fell is appropriate on my behalf.*

One imagines the externality aspect of third party intervention is intended to place some pressure of university staff to take his appeal seriously.

Another, Student 90P mentions in his appeal that he and his father had undertaken a constructive meeting with a member of the support services. It is not obvious if this was meant to carry any reminder to the university that he would use parental input but is certainly an indicator that some students feel the need for parental support also.

Student 90F is supported by a mother who takes an aggressive stance threatening the intervention of various academic bodies and on the basis the student felt he would be penalised if he tried to progress matters himself.

Only one student (Student78C) shows evidence of involving the students union and has secured a supporting letter. The student however does not mention it – the letter is submitted independently. NB. Is there an issue here – where do students get help from in the university or do they want help from the university? There is a staff member to offer advice at Riverside but this is not noted in any of the complaints.

Students do submit appeals without referring to parental support. One student (67H) is supported by a father who sends in a letter quoting much of the student's text and also with undertones of additional matters that may be raised at another point i.e. if the complaint fails. The circumstances are understandable as the student has not achieved a degree and is stated to be 'devastated'.

Students can also use the threat of an external party; Student 67F advises she has copied in the Chancellor and her MP.

The categories of third party intervention also allude to statements about third party evidence which varies from medical, to counsellor to police reports that students cite to support their complaint.

It is also interesting to see the emergence of challenges to academic judgement with one student referring their work to four external specialists in the subject area in support of their claim that their work is worth more than the assessed work

*"Their comments were although I could do more regarding methodology....the general remark was that the Dissertation was excellent regarding BSc standards and for certain not of a (fail) grade."*

(Student78Z)

The start of more common practice now?

Watch for evidence/statements on student support needs – does this influence behaviour?

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 14 - Deserving Better Outcomes**

Student 67O complains that *...I feel that my award of a Lower Class Honours degree is not a fair reflection of my performance* – she is 1% below the higher classification but does not meet the Assessment Board's borderline criteria for the higher award. The student raises a number of issues including illness and issues relating to course delivery that should have been raised in advance. She has expectations of a higher classification based on prior marks but the expectation was not met. There is no mention of perceptions of the currency carried by a 2.1 and her assumptions are debatable since the higher marks banding was in a prior year. Were students briefed on progress and should Riverside be more stringent here – i.e. results briefing for every student not just those in failing position?

Another student 67S dissatisfied with her classification, complains about receiving a *'too low'* mark for one unit listing all the work undertaken and seeks a remark to ensure that the submitted work was *...marked together properly*. Here the student had actually been counselled by an academic that they were in line for a higher classification – again expectations not being met are the issue. Ultimately the student claims the poor classification will impact her employment potential, so here we need to consider what impression students have of employer expectations and where these have come from. Indication is given by one student (90L) who writes: *...at times in the future I may not be taken any further in a company because I don't have a 2.1*.

Yet another student concerned by a borderline classification issue at 59% but failing to achieve the higher banding identifies a problem in the unit average of her dissertation unit and raises supervisory issues. The student advises that *I am not a second class (lower) degree student...* and *...I am a very keen student*. (Another student argues that they would not have been given a third class degree if they had been given all the additional time their disability was due. Concern around borderline classifications and the perceived 'value' by students of degree classifications are again the trigger for complaint behaviour.

This is closely allied to Core Category 7 *Being subject to unfair treatment* where perceptions of fairness had previously been identified as related to assessment outcomes. Where academic expectations are not met the student believes there is unfairness:

*The notified result does not properly reflect the considerable hard work and effort put in over the year....given the circumstances I therefore feel that the award of an unclassified degree is grossly unfair.*

Students continue to challenge the University's 'fit to sit' extenuating circumstances policy where they experience borderline classifications. On hindsight they feel they should have applied for EC when initially they considered themselves 'fit to sit': one student with health issues in his final year whose final year performance drops him below a 2.1 average writes *I was wrong. My results were the worse grades I have ever received at University*" (Student 78G)



## Appendix RD.4

One student complains about the poor tuition and time available for ‘one to one’ support for dissertations, another argues that support and comments was effusive to the extent his final mark – the desired 2.1 – was not high enough. This is only part of a range of complaints which emerge where the student received a lower 2.2 but is borderline for a higher 2.1.

*I feel I was misled, and unfairly lulled in to a false sense of security that I had aced my project, which a low 2.1 does not reflect* (Student 78AA)

Borderline classification issues are the trigger for complaints about unfairness and deserving a better outcome. However students also feel that their view they have worked hard should result in success apparently irrespective of academic ability:

One student (98S) who has failed a repeat year of a year previously failed argues that he wants to repeat the year because ...*I have tried hard in every subject and have completed and handed every piece of work and as getting good marks for all my work.*

For some complainants effort expended is significant, not the outcome itself. One student complains that their work was recognised by professionals in the industry but that academic staff have failed to offer the same support in their marking:

*But it just doesn't seem to of even be recognised in the marking. It's just not good enough ...it's just outrageous frankly.* (Student 90L).

Here again the student is borderline for a higher classification and failed to achieve it. The student states that she knew her work would be tight on the classification and therefore: *I've put more effort in to this project than any other I've done at Riverside.* The student's final year unit marks profile do not reflect the higher classification but the student believes effort they have put in show that they do warrant it. The student has no faith in the marking system for the project that they believe has resulted in them being given a classification of degree that does not reflect their ability.

Another student (Student 90N) with marks capped feels he is receiving a lower classification than he deserves given evidence of achieving prizes both internally in the university and externally.

*I am totally unsatisfied of the result of my appeal. I've worked very hard in the 3 years studied, I have a clear conscience about all these effort I put into my degree. I really don't think I deserve an unclassified degree.* (Student 90T).

Students have a perception of their ability and potential and this drives complaints where assessment outcomes do not reflect their view:

*I came to University to gain a Degree that would enhance the high grades I had already received at GCSE and A Level from my previous two educational establishments. I have been awarded a level that, for me, is disappointing and inhibits my employment opportunities in the current job market, as I am sure you are aware that many employers specify a minimum level of 2.1 to apply for the positions.* (Student 78I)

## **Appendix RD.4**

NB. Any literature on classification/employment links?? Where and when are students being influenced by a 2.1 as being the answer to employment? Note here a preoccupation with employment but not on a value for money basis. No financial transaction issues – students complain because they think they MERIT a better result, no because they have paid for it.

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 4 - Confirming adherence to university procedures**

This category encapsulates the efforts made by students in their complaints to show how they were careful within the circumstances of the complaint to align with the requirements of academic staff or the associated procedures of the university.

One student is influenced by one tutor to undertake an assessment in a particular way and is then influenced by another tutor to complain on the basis that the earlier advice was wrong. The student complains because the marking indicates that original academic guidance would have influenced the marking positively:

*I returned to my tutor on several occasions to discuss the progress of my essay. I was not encouraged to redirect my plans. (Student78Y)*

The student is careful to explain that they have done what the tutor wanted but without the desired success.

Student 89O, with extensive medical issues, confirms that on two occasions she did exactly as advised by one of the student advisers but was unable to secure her appeal for a higher classification. Another student (89Q) who has had his final year impacted by a series of personal traumas opens his appeal by assurance that he started the year very positively with all participation and engagement in all units. This very much reflects university terminology and seems to be an attempt by the student to stress that he has been aware of and tried to adhere to University expectations.

Following the advice of academic staff appears to be viewed as a guarantee of academic success and students appear bewildered and complain where assessment marks do not meet their expectations. One student whose resit dissertation mark shows no improvement on his prior effort writes:

*Please consider that all year I have spend a significant time and energy for the realization of this Dissertation following the advice and guidance of.....which was my supervisor. (Student78Z)*

A student who has been withdrawn from a course partially due to non-submission of a resit assessment, complains at length about errors in the receipt and marking of his work and in respect of a decision that he had not submitted the correct work:

*I believe that I had fully complied with re-sit briefs. (Student 90D)*

A student complaint deals with the submission of evidence as required by the University's EC policy and as guided by support staff. The student is explaining why he could not submit a piece of assessment. Personal circumstances are unusual and traumatic – the shooting of a family member and the sudden illness of a parent both of which necessitated student involvement irrespective of personal impact. Correspondence between staff notes a hard

## Appendix RD.4

line being taken – the focus is on evidence not the student. The student explains that he was not sure of the nature of evidence to support the claim

The evidence based focus of Riverside's extenuating circumstances policy is demanding e.g. the student is asked to provide proof they are a carer for their mother who was ill when it would not be unreasonable to assume the student might have put his mother as a priority and reasonably so. Whilst wishing to encourage only genuine submissions and be fair to all by expecting evidence where reasonable is there not a case to say that the EC case should be slightly more sympathetic? Once the student has secured all the evidence he thinks is needed he politely asks:

*Now that I have sufficient evidence to support my situation, I would like to further appeal against the Faculty stage decision please. I hope this is looked into further and re-evaluated as I enjoy this course and this university thoroughly and I hope to progress with my studies.*  
(Student 90G)

What is going on in this category: key point codes all about 'adherence' - transactional issues – we do what you want so you keep your side of the bargain – when you don't we complain. Student expectations as part of The Deal? Power Issues where students feel they have to demonstrate compliance?

This category also demonstrates that students NEED directing. Expect to adhere to university procedures/advice – not independent – needy – want and expect to be told what to do. Complaints arise where students get things wrong after adhering to advice because their expectation is that is what they should do – what else would they do?

### **Theoretical Memorandum: Core Category 17 – ‘Promoting personal effort’**

Student complainants are keen to promote their personal effort – apparent perception of the value of that effort and that it has not been appropriately recognised?

A student who has been unable to undertake resits as work has not been received is keen that university staff are aware that she has made considerable effort to secure it.

*I don't know what else I could of done as the situation was not my fault! I cannot stress how important this is and that there is nothing more I could of done! This is a mistake in the faculty office.* (Student 89C)

A student who has failed units despite having a repeat year is very keen to promote his efforts and sees a lower award as therefore unfair:

*...I have tried hard in every subject and have completed and handed every piece of work and was getting good marks for all my work...and was therefore confident .....that I would definitely pass even if I didn't do so well in the exam.*”(Student 89S)

A student has failed a unit which impacts on his ability to achieve an Honours degree. The unit was a group project and required liaison amongst peer students. As a repeat year student the complainant points out that he had problems integrating with the group – in fact he appears to have been ignored by the group. In his complaint he stresses continually the efforts he made to contact the group and also produced work himself:

*I believe that my own contribution was greater than any of the other team members...I made a total of seven appointments with the other group members to produce the video but on every occasion one or more of them called off or failed to turn up ....despite promises that they would get back to me, they never did.* (Student 78U)

Here the University is trying to resolve a complaint in the often contentious group work environment and where students often perceive a level of unfairness. The student is clear about the perception of their input and failure to recognise it has prompted the complaint. It is of note that the follow on issue about the standard of any work undertaken is not explored – the student's concern is the scale of the contribution rather than the quality and this may echo with what seems to be student's transactional view of input = pass rather than input = academic assessment = pass or fail.

Promoting personal effort also aligns with Core Category 14 Deserving Better Outcomes: due to personal effort students believe they deserve better, as do students who believe their academic standing is such that they should be awarded higher marks.

Again about managing expectations and briefings. Does the university need to ensure that all students are spoken to annually about their academic performance? How are students otherwise getting feedback (note that feedback is a particular issue for the Students Union sabbatical officer in 2009-2010?)

## **Appendix RD.4**

Assessment related issues are influencing student behaviour – not surprising in an HEI!! – However it is the failed expectations that are leading to dissatisfied students – is failure a non-concept?

ONLINE INTERVIEW EXTRACT: STUDENT 90H

Re: Research project in to student complaints

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

[Add to contacts](#)

22/05/2013

[Documents](#)

To: christine millward



Outlook.com [Active View](#)

1 attachment (19.3 KB)



[View online](#)

[Download as zip](#)

Please find the attachment.

I have tried to answers most of them. Hope will be helpful for your research and will new intern student will get benefit in future.

Best of Luck.

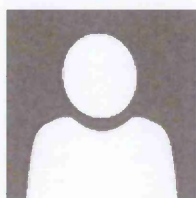
**Extract: Online interview transcript: Student 67G**

Re: Research into university complaints

[Add to contacts](#)

28/05/2013

To: christine millward



**Please feel free to ask me to clarify anything that is not completely understood this is a confusing and complex complain.**

1. What was your complaint about? What motivated you to submit it formally at University level (*i.e. after having already put a complaint to the faculty*)?

I started ..... in about 2004/5. After struggling with dyslexia and depression and anxiety i had to re do my second year of this course. The only problem being that in 2004/5 the course was closed to re write it. So i had no year to re do. I was told i would have to go over to being a distance learner (which was not conducive to my mental state and also my educational needs) As i was not told that the course i had arrange to transfer to had not gained enough numbers to run as a campus based course. After a long and confusing rounds of traipsing to the faculty office in tears and them not having the slightest idea what was going on. I was told my only option would be distance learning. So i was handed 6 cd's and told to bring back the work. No lectures no contact with the lecturers themselves. Any time i had questions or needed help i could not find anyone from the course to help me. This mixed with the fact i was receiving counselling from the uni as this had very much effected my mental health. I was told to speak to the student services office. After tryin g to explain the very complicated situation i was in i was advised it would be best for me to complain as if i did they would have to internally find out what the hell was going on and have to officialy tell me through



traceable dateable quotable letters or e-mails. I complained about the fact that i was not informed about my options fully and that with my dyslexia i would never have agreed to be a distance learner as it was in no going to work with my level of dyslexia. I wanted the faculty to officially answer my question instead of telling me to my face that the situation i was put in was wrong and should never have happened. I wanted the university to pay me back my living expenses that i had to claim from the student loans company as i would never have taken up the course because of my funding status. ( I had to submit mitigating circumstances for many of my essays as my mental state was very much detraining throughout my university experience. This therefore had a knock on effect on my funding as you only get a certain amount in your lifetime)

**What was the *actual* outcome of your complaint to the University and what did you feel about it?**

I received my living allowance back from the university. I also received the written conclusion of the complaint which seems to blame me for not being a more studious student. Has a go at me for my lack of organisational skills and basically lays the blame at my door and also one of the lecturers. I was devastated that they seemed to blame me for all the trouble that happened. I was in such a state that i just wanted all contact and anything to do with xxxxx university to be over. I was very unhappy with the conclusion but by this time i just wanted nothing more to do with the uni. They took so long and broke their own complaint deadlines that i was forced to defer again for a year because i was just left hanging. (i missed clearing and the timescale of the complaint meant i couldn't join another course till the following academic year) I felt let down that a educational institution could take my money (government funding) provide a sub standard course, discriminate against a dyslexic student with major mental health problems and then just brush her off with oh im sorry it seems to be YOUR lack of participation in the course that was the problem. It was said that if i was a more pro active student then some of the issues would never have happened. The thing that gets me and still effects me today is that i currently owe £28,500 for a degree i don't have and cannot complete because of lack of funding available. I feel i was mistreated as a stated dyslexic student with major history of depression. i feel i was laughed off and ignored when i brought my concerns to the attention of any of the university staff both lecturers and faculty and that neither of them knew what was actually going on in the institution that they worked in. This whole situation has had a major effect on my life and I still suffer with major depression over my whole university experience. While writing this I've been in tears i never thought that me wanting to gain a degree would have such a massive adverse effect on my mental and emotional health. I have lost all faith in our education system.

---

**From:** christine millward <hecomplaintsresearch@hotmail.co.uk>  
**To:** .....>

**Sent:** Tuesday, 21 May 2013, 22:15  
**Subject:** RE: Research into university complaints

.....

**Extract: Online interview transcript: Student 67C**

Re: follow-up

Re: follow-up

XXXXXXXXXX

[Add to contacts](#)

15/09/2013

To: christine millward



Hi Christine,

Once again I must apologise for my slow reply to your email but life for a small village can be hectic, and just shopping has now become a day out ha ha. I hope your kitchen is all sorted now and yes I do believe how much stuff you can gather over the years, it took us a year to clear out our house from top to bottom ready to sell !!!!!

Anyway once again I digress, in answer to your question I found that very few universities would consider a 2:2 for an MA or teacher training, and those that did were too far for me to commute to, and also tended not to have much of a reputation.

I also checked out graduate opportunities and these were not available to a 2:2 either, which then logically followed that any real prospects were not going to be available to anything below a 2:1.

In the real world outside university the grades realistically equate to a 1st ( the world is your oyster, especially if that degree is from one of the top ten universities ), a 2:1 ( this equates to coming in 2nd, not as good as a 1st but still affords doors opening ), a 2:2 ( well this is seen as coming in 3rd and when you have a 1st or 2nd to choose from there's no contest, it's put on your degree certificate as " Second Class, Second Degree" and the "Second Class" is how it's

perceived ), then there is a 3rd ( well with this grade you're better off not even mentioning you have a degree as its assumed you only just scraped by and would be a liability not an asset).

I hope this helps.

Best wishes

XXXXXXXXXX

## APPENDIX DA.1

### Example student complaint letter: Student 67K

Dear Sir,

I wrote an appeal 2<sup>nd</sup> week of September to the faculty and got a reply just last week. I am very disappointed with how my appeal has been dealt with, I feel I have been unfairly treated and my circumstances have not been fully looked into.

I had a few resits to do this summer, due to my granddads death I had to rush to Pakistan as the funeral had to take place there. In this very upsetting time I found it very difficult to fully concentrate, I was even in depression for a short period.

In response to my appeal I was told that I did not hand in appropriate evidence and that I have used many extenuating circumstances before. I am very disappointed how this was mentioned to me as it is not my fault if I have been experiencing health problems or family bereavements.

Also when I sent my first email I clearly wrote that I could hand in evidence but I had no reply. My case has been very delayed by the faculty. I handed in my travel ticket and a copy of my passport to the office, it was now said in the response that I should hand in a death certificate. I am unable to hand in a death certificate as my uncle, next of kin is now visiting Saudi Arabia to pray for my granddad as it's a very religious time for us at the moment.

Due to this death and because it brought a very sad time to my family, I was unable to cope, I fell very ill as this sad time was very difficult for me and my family, I did not even seek doctors help at the time because too much was going on and it was difficult because special prayers were kept in his memory. And I had to do my assignments; I still tried so hard and did hand in all my work to best of my ability at the time.

I was told in the reply letter that why I didn't seek help from the university, and that's because that wasn't first priority for me at the time. My granddads death was a shock and trying to deal with my family at the same time was very hard.

I honestly feel that the situation I was in has not been considered and as a result it seems like my health problems and other difficulties I have had have been seen as if I have been making excuses. I am very unhappy with the result I got back.

In my first year of the course I failed [REDACTED] 1 by 2 marks, and in my 3<sup>rd</sup> year I failed [REDACTED] by 1 mark, in total 3 marks are stopping me from graduating this year, I would really appreciate it if you could compensate these marks from my other units please as I have been at this university for 5 years and I need to get myself a proper job as financially I can't afford to study and my knee operation has also become an important issue for me.

I was also told in response to my appeal that I did not attend my viva, yes this is correct but

## APPENDIX DA.1

my supervisor of my dissertation was aware that I was having problems, due to my granddad being so poorly and ill.

I would really appreciate your help; I am attaching a letter from the doctor. Although the doctors letter mentions that I visited in September that's because I got to a serious stage. In August I could not cope with the death, attending special prayers and doing my uni work it all became very stressful and I just didn't seek doctors help because as there was just too much going on in my life.

I would really appreciate your help and if you could compensate and take marks from other units to pass me for this year.

Thank you

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## APPENDIX DA.2

Example student complaint letter: Student 78I



14 August 2008

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Dear Sirs,

[REDACTED]

After receiving my results, for my degree in [REDACTED], I appealed the mark given to my final major project. At the time of receiving my results I telephoned the university to speak to my course tutor, but was informed she was on holiday. As I had no idea why a piece of work I had tailored to meet the criteria in mark scheme of first level, had only achieved a mark in 2:2 level, and was unable to discuss this with the course tutor, I felt I had no option but to go ahead and appeal the mark, as I had to do this within the deadline given.

The appeal was on the grounds that the work was not marked in accordance with the unit descriptor. I hoped I would receive a response that would either confirm my appeal, or provide the marking/feedback sheet, which would explain to me where my work failed. The response I received gave me no further information, other than the work had been marked correctly. I was not reassured by this reply, especially as it did not even state correct information regarding my unit marks, which ranged from 40% to 68%, not 58%. Of these I was only aware of one full unit's marks, before the deadline for submitting the final project. The remaining units' marks were received after this project was completed, so I was not aware of my level of underachievement until then. Had I been aware, I would have discussed this with my tutor, to identify where I was failing, and attempt to improve on this.

Having received consistently high marks in years one and two, I know I am a capable student. I chose Brand Marketing as the subject of my final project, as this had been the work that I had achieved my highest mark of 78% in my second year, and therefore felt this was my strongest area. I put an enormous amount of effort into my project to produce work that, I felt, was better than the work I had produced in year 2. Throughout the production of this work, I did not receive any negative comments that would indicate I was not working to my capability. The comments of the external examiner, to me, were that the work was extremely well researched, visuals were clearly

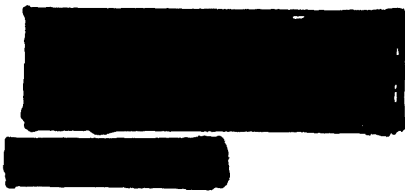
## APPENDIX D A.2

developed and well chosen. All this seemed to indicate to me that I had achieved what I set out to do.

After all this, I am sure you will understand my bitter disappointment, not only with the mark for this project, but with the overall award I finally received, which may have been affected if I had received a better mark for this final unit. I therefore need to know where I failed in this. With no indication during the production of this work that it was not of the standard I am capable of, and even more concerning, never being questioned about my apparent underachievement during the final year, I had no opportunity to try and improve this. I am concerned that this wasn't brought to my attention and discussed with me by any of the tutors, who I would have hoped would support me to achieve my best.

I came to University to gain a Degree that would enhance the high grades I had already received at GCSE and A Level from my previous two educational establishments. I have been awarded a level that, for me, is disappointing and inhibits my employment opportunities in the current graduate job market, as I am sure you are aware that many employers specify a minimum level of 2:1 to apply for the positions. It is for this reason I need to have written feedback on the project, so that, should I get the opportunity at interview, I can at least try and explain my final degree level. I would therefore appreciate your review of this appeal.

Yours faithfully

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature and name of the sender.



**Example student complaint letter: Student 89S**

I have received my results and seen that I have failed on 2 units which is the [REDACTED] units. I want to appeal against this decision. This year was a repeat for me and I have tried hard in every subject and have completed and handed every piece of work and was getting good marks for all my work. For the maths unit the unit was a 40% exam and the rest was from class work. I had done well in the class work and was getting around 75% and therefore was confident with the maths unit that I would definitely pass even if I didn't do so well in the exam. From the exam I got a few marks below 40% which has failed me from the whole unit as the rest of the work in the unit was not aggregated. The same thing happened with the analogue & digital unit where I was confident I would pass relying on the good grades I was getting from coursework which made me think that I didn't have to do very well in the exam however the marks of the assessments within the unit have not been aggregated.

Last summer I was sent referrals but I was unable to do them and didn't attempt to do them as I was away and was in the process of moving houses so therefore I spoke to [REDACTED] because I wanted to repeat the whole year rather than doing the summer referrals and was told that the units will be capped at 40% however I was not told or made aware of the policy which was that marks won't be aggregated within the unit and compensation wouldn't be allowed. For this misunderstanding I have failed two units which I was very confident in passing I had more than enough marks for my course work to aggregate for the exam.

I have wrote an appeal via e-mail and have been told that referrals are not eligible for compensations and neither marks are aggregated which I genuinely didn't know. They mentioned about the referrals sent to me last summer had some information about them even if they did I didn't do the summer referrals and didn't think it would apply for the year I'm repeating as I'm attending lessons as normal and doing my projects I though everything is just the same apart from the unit being capped to 40% I was sent no new information about the final referral when I started the academic year. I was told that I should of looked on the glossary of terms which I have and highlighted that there is no clear information on the refer final section that compensation is not eligible and neither will the assessments in the unit will be aggregated. I have looked on the glossary of terms found on the portal website under the final referral section there is no clear information containing aggregation of the elements within the unit or if it is aggregation exempt. I had also looked on the policy documents for assessment in the unidocs site and in the section I have highlighted it does say that 'aggregation will be as normal except for approved exemptions' I was not made aware that my assessments were exempt for aggregation and I don't agree that the policy that is published is clear enough relating to aggregation in the unit.

### APPENDIX DA.3

Because of this misunderstanding I am only eligible for an unclassified degree which is very upsetting and could cost me a lot in life for me because of me being misunderstood of the conditions.

I am prepared to do absolutely anything to make up for this all I want is to graduate with an honours degree in engineering this very important for me and my family I don't want to have re start another course from year one for the third time I have invested a lot of money into my studies and time and I am 22 years old now as I will have no other choice but to leave studying due to the misunderstanding of the policy i really enjoy my course and attending the university and the last thing i would want is this chance taken away from me. I am serious about my studies i was recommended to the work placement by one of my tutors for the summer, I managed to find some work experience which went to in Istanbul Turkey and had work experience for [REDACTED] which is a high die casting company and which has help me improve knowledge in engineering. I have spoken to my head of course [REDACTED] and they are prepared to support the case as they have seen that i have turned things around in my studies and have even gained the best marks for certain assessment's from the whole class and my misunderstanding is genuine.

Thank you

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

**Example student complaint letter: Student 90I**

Respected Sir/Madam,

Myself [REDACTED] from [REDACTED]. The reason I am writing is to bring to your notice that I retrievably got failed mark in one unit 'Risk Management' where the overall marking is 34% and I am just one mark away to get the unit compensated. According to my knowledge the result shown in the portal mentioned that this is not an official result and will be published after progression and examination board's verification. I thought that going forward there will be a chance at the end of the course if I perform well in other units. However, the board could not compensate. But at this point of time if I made an appeal at academic level they informed that it's out of time to help me out.

I strongly believe that all the international students at [REDACTED] University are not treated the same. There are situations where university has deviated their rules in case of some international students. I understand that it might be due to circumstances. However I feel it is not fair to be treated so. I really got unsatisfactory answer from the appeal and it is very painful after completing all the tasks I will be given PGDHE certificate which is of no value or met entrance level to prove my talent at any platform. Further I cannot go to my home country and seek any employment with this certificate and it will be disrespect for my family if they come to know this. Hence I request you to please investigate and help me to get my masters where I will be very thankful to the university and I can start my career.

Lastly I think that is unfair that postgraduates and undergraduates do not have a level playing field. If an undergraduate student fails a unit he can still get his degree but if a master's student fails a unit there is no opportunity for him to get his masters degree.

Thanks and Regards

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
Date: 20/8/10
Ref:
Action: [REDACTED]